



ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

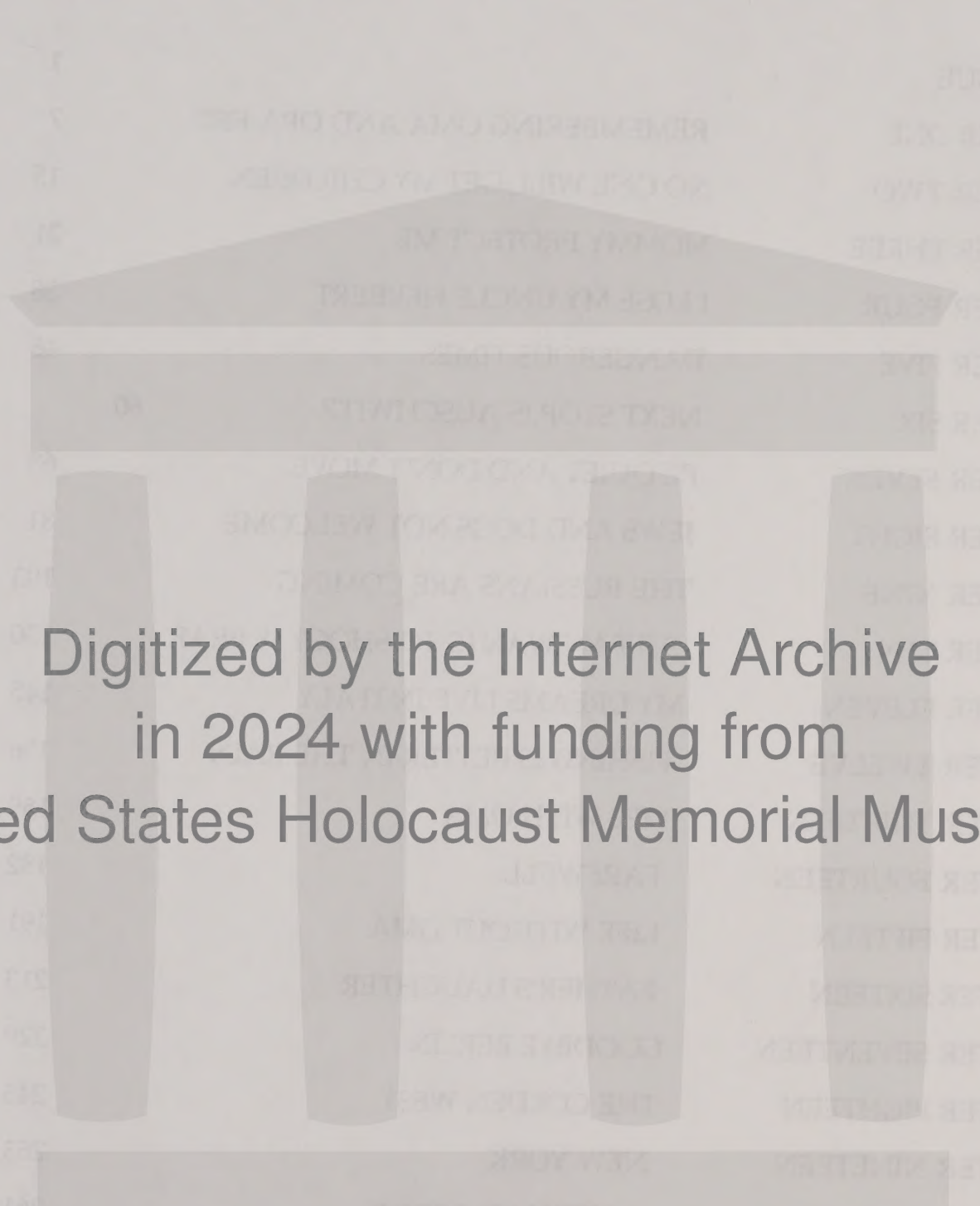
Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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PROLOGUE

"So when was the last time you saw your father?" he asks.

I look down at my hands as they fidget with the hem of my dress and say nothing.

He sits on *Oma's* (grandmother's) bed in front of me and, reaching over, pinches my cheek with two fingers. In the tone of voice that adults reserve for talking to six-year-olds, he asks again, "Now, tell me, Vivian, when did you last see your Papa?"

I shake my head and say, "No, I haven't seen him for a long time. I don't know where he is."

The finger comes again, hooking my chin and forcing my head up and toward him. I look into the pale, watery eyes of the man in the gray Gestapo uniform. My heart pulses so hard in my ears that I can barely hear his words.

"Have you seen Papa this week, *Liebchen*? (Sweetie)" he coos. "Who are his friends?" I shake my head "No," knowing that it was a few hours earlier that Papa came to our street, near the apartment. He stood in the shadow of the corner house, watching me. I knew that he had come to see me, and somehow, instinctively, I also knew that I should not go to him and that he could not come to me. We looked at each other, and then he turned and slipped away. It will be almost ten years before I

see him again.

The Gestapo man stands and abruptly leaves the bedroom. It isn't until I see him in the living room, talking to Oma, that my tears come.

The time was November 1944. The place was Berlin. And my father was a Jew.

My parents named me Vivian. I was born on October 1, 1938, in Berlin, Germany, during the Nazi regime. One month later, on November 9, the Nazis torched, vandalized and desecrated Jewish homes, businesses and places of worship. That night of rampage went down in infamy as "*Kristallnacht*" ("Crystal Night.")

The Nazis required that my birth certificate and other documents include the name Rea Chana to identify me as a Jew. All Jewish men were ordered to take "Israel" as their name. All Jewish women were ordered to take the name "Sara". My father was renamed Hans Israel Ert, and my half-brother was called Alfred Israel Ert. Alfred was adopted by my father. He had been born 11 years earlier, during my mother's first marriage to a Jewish man. My family affectionately called me Vivi or Vivilein, and my brother was called Ali.

In 1933, my mother, Elli Gimpel, a feisty, blue-eyed blonde, hungry for life, met my Jewish father, Hans Ert, a good-looking business man who exuded

confidence in himself and the future. They fell in love -- she with her whole heart, he with half of his. Unfortunately, Germany was a very dangerous place for Jews at this time. Although my mother was Lutheran, when she married my father on May 22, 1934, she converted to Judaism. Mother told me that it was her love for my father and his family -- who had taken her into their home and hearts -- that compelled her to convert, not religious philosophy, or the wish to follow Jewish religious customs.

According to my mother, their marriage was difficult. Father was very flirtatious. "He was not as ready for marriage as I was," she said. Father's job often took him away from home. She felt that he enjoyed the admiration and attention of other women, while mother wanted only him.

The atmosphere in Germany worsened.

My mother told me that in 1935 she suggested they leave Germany, but my father said, "We're Germans first, Jews second. We belong here. I don't think we'll have trouble." In time, it became harder to leave. Still, he and many others did not want to see the impending doom; besides, most had no other place to go. By 1938, the year of my birth, specific city and park benches were marked "for Jews only." Street names, honoring a Jewish author or poet, were renamed. Schools, movies, theaters, concerts and swimming pools were banned to Jews. Jewish employees were dismissed. Jewish doctors and lawyers could no longer practice. Specific streets like

the popular promenade "*Unter den Linden*" (Under the Linden trees) could not be used by Jews. In February 1939, my mother and father were evicted from the apartment they had occupied for five years. The landlord said, "I no longer want Jews in my apartment house." In March 1939, it became illegal for Jews to own gold, silver, jewels, fur coats, telephones or pets.

Finally, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, made a public vow to jubilant Berliners to make Berlin *Judenfrei*. (free of Jews.)

Persecutions were intensified and enthusiastic Aryan citizens were encouraged to participate in hostile acts on the grounds that Jews in Berlin were living violation of the law. "Live for today, for tomorrow we may not have the chance," became a motto among Jews as oppression spread like black paint splashed on a white wall.

These factors created a turbulent marriage for my parents. On September 1, 1941, the Nazis ordered all Jews over the age of six to wear a Star of David over their heart, sewn, not pinned, on all outer clothing. The discovery of a Star of David that was pinned, rather than sewn, could mean immediate deportation. My parents divorced that year at my fathers insistence, and my mother renounced the Jewish religion. Being Jewish by choice had become too dangerous and rebellious, considering the German national attitude toward Jews.

Mother was Lutheran again and was allowed to drop the name "Sara." My brother and I were considered "*Mishlinge*," (half breeds, a product of mixed religion, also known as privileged Jews.) If my brother and I had not been privileged Jews, we probably could not have survived. The Mishling status was a life-saving identity in Nazi Germany, where Jews, by birth, were condemned to die.

By the end of 1942, the Jews living in Berlin were rounded up in great numbers. Even though the people of Jewish faith had lived in Germany for hundreds of years, living assimilated lives, they were now singled out and plucked from the streets.

Some Jews lived underground to extend their chances of survival. Underground living excluded the very young and the elderly, as the hardship one had to endure by constant hiding and living in shadows were filled with obstacles that required great financial and physical resources.

All citizens had to register with the local police and had to carry a national *Kennkarte* (identification card.) Jewish identification cards were stamped with a large black J on the cover of the gray cloth folder. Jews were singled out by having to wear a black-on-yellow Star of David. The act of removing the Star of David from one's clothing was, if caught, reason for immediate arrest and deportation.

Life was made as difficult as possible for Jews. Their meager food ration card

could no longer be used: so there was constant hunger. Those gentile friends who were willing to help risked the safety of their own families. Malignant Jewish spotters roamed the streets, identifying underground Jews to authorities to temporarily extend their own lives. Even strangers were likely to report their suspicions regarding a person, because underground Jews were a violation of German law.

It is in this setting that my story begins....

CHAPTER ONE

REMEMBERING OMA AND OPA ERT

“What’s wrong?” I ask *Mutti*, (Mommy) as she storms past me, down the hall into her bedroom. She returns a minute later clutching a handbag and frantically dials the phone.

“Mother?” she says. “I have to help them pack. Yes today. I had a phone call from Grandfather Ert.... I know he doesn’t have a phone, but he called me from a neighbor’s apartment.... The Erts have received an official notification from the SS. It told them to remain in the flat. They are to be resettled ... in the East....”

“Yes, today. One suitcase per person. They need me. Oh, God; it’s all over.” She listens to the black handle and says, “*Ja... Ja*, that’s a good idea. Meet me. I’m leaving now.”

Impatiently, she grabs my hand and pulls me along. I hear the panic in her

voice and decide to wait with further questions. We run toward the *U Bahn*, (the metro,) which pulls into the station as we run up the narrow staircase. Mutti finds a seat in the crowded train. I stand between her legs and look at the blank faces of the other passengers.

"Where are we going?" I ask. Mutti rummages in her purse for a handkerchief. She doesn't answer, but I hear her sob.

"What's wrong?" I wonder.

"Shsh," she says, and lays her finger over my lips. She jumps up when the stop Alexander Platz is announced, and we get off the train. I am very surprised to see my grandmother, whom I always call *Oma*, waiting for us on the platform.

"Thank you mother; I've got to run," says Mutti, placing my hand in Oma's.

"Come with me Vivi," says Oma, quickly walking down the ramp to reach the street. "Bad things are happening. *Ernstes Zeiten*, (Serious times). "Your Ert grandparents need your mother today."

"Do they need Papa also?" I ask.

"No, they don't need Papa today. I hope he's nowhere near them today," she says, squeezing my hand tighter.

"It's ~~been~~ a long time since I've seen him; He said that he'd see me in July and it is already August," I say.

"Are you hungry?" asks Oma.

"Yes," I answer. "My stomach is growling. Can you hear it? Mutti was just making my breakfast when she got a telephone call."

At her apartment, Oma fills a large bowl of hot pea soup for me. It is smooth and thick. She and my *Opa* (grandfather) sip tea out of large cups, as they watch me eat.

"What are you whispering?" I ask.

"Nothing for you, *mein Kind*, (my child,) Opa says, sadly shaking his head from side to side. Oma will read you a story and then I'll take you for a walk.

It is after six in the evening when Mutti returns to Oma's apartment. Opa leaps up and helps her to a chair. My doll is stuck under her arm like a sack.

"Don't carry *Röschen* (Rosy) like that," I say, and pull her away from Mutti's arm. "Grandmother Ert hasn't fixed her," I complain, pulling at the one black button eye that still dangles on her cheek. I kiss Röschen's red lips. "I still love you even without two eyes," I say, cradling her.

"She was on grandmother Ert's mending basket, but didn't get repaired and now she never will," Mutti sobs, and hides her face between trembling hands. Oma strokes her hair and sits down at the worn kitchen table, eyes clouded with sadness.

"Why won't Oma Ert fix her for me?" I pout. "She promised me that she would."

"They were picked up," Mutti says, sobbing. I start to cry too, although I don't understand why everybody is crying.

"Grandmother Ert was weeping, and Grandfather was trying to calm and reassure her," Mutti stammers, addressing Oma and Opa.

"Our orders have come 'to relocate' in the East," he told me. "We've been

afraid for a long time, prayed to God, but the day has come." Mutti accepts a glass of water from Opa as she moans out loud. I stand next to her chair and stroke her back.

"Their household items, suitcases and clothing were thrown about. The apartment was in chaos. My old, gentle father-in-law cried, 'We don't know where we are being resettled in the East,' if they will separate us, or if we can ever return to Berlin,' Mutti sobs.

I picture my dear grandparents and my beautiful, recently married 20 year~~old~~ aunt Hanni and her young husband Gerhard Rushin. All *Evakuiert..* (resettled.) I don't know what the word means, but I know it must mean something horrible, because I've never seen Mutti cry this loud. Never. I cry with her.

"They asked me to please help them and you know how dearly I love them. I found a small suitcase in the hall closet and started to fill it with soap, towels, scissors, and a needle and thread. Then the door bell rang. They stared at me. I reluctantly moved toward the door. "

"I opened it, and a short, gray-haired Gestapo officer swaggered into the apartment, pushing me aside with his stick. He told the family, 'Only one suitcase per person is allowed, and hurry up.' After he identified the family members, he checked my papers and verified that I am a Lutheran. Then he asked where Hans Ert is, and I told him that we are divorced and no one knows where he is." Mutti says, a fine pulse beating rapidly in the hollow of her neck.

"My poor beloved Hanni clung to my hand all afternoon. I've loved her and watched her grow since she was 11 years old. She loved to confide in me, you know, even told me of her first kiss with Gerhard. It just tears my heart out... I can't go

on."

The water kettle whistles, and everybody jumps at the loud squeal. Opa prepares tea with lots of precious sugar for us all. He pours a shot of Schnapps in Mutti's tea and in his own cup.

"Drink tea Elli," he urges. "Drink." Mutti sips tea slowly, gazing into space.

"Dear Mother and Father Ert were too distraught to know what to pack," Mutti continues, "and how could they know. So I was brave for them, not wishing to make it more difficult. I stuffed a change of clothing, several layers of underwear, food that will keep, cooked potatoes, bread, carrots ... warm clothing. Cardigans... The elderly are always chilly, especially mother Ert. I pinned a small pocket in her dress for her glasses. She's always misplacing them. And, of course, I packed her wool shawl. I heated some soup for them and even offered the Gestapo man a cup of coffee. He drank it, as he looked into closets and checked under the beds for anyone hiding. I was desperate.... I didn't know what to do.... I wanted to save them, but what could I do?" She pulls her hair away from her face with both hands, revealing bloodshot eyes and puffy lips. Opa pulls me onto his lap, and I hide my face in his scratchy sweater, beginning to understand that I might never see my grandparents or aunt Hanni again. Why else is Mutti crying, as well as Oma and Opa.

"So I begged the Gestapo official to please spare my Hanni. 'She's so young, she hasn't lived yet,' I said. 'Please let me keep her. I'll hide her, and she'll never be found,' I assured him. Apparently, my pleading touched his Gestapo heart." Mutti, closes her eyes and her lips tremble as she speaks.

'Ja, Ja Sie ist ein schöner Käfer. Sie können Die behalten,' (Yes, she is a pretty bug. You can keep her,") he whispered to me, as he handed back the empty coffee cup. But when I repeated my offer to Gerhard, he said, 'No. It's out of the question. Where I go, my wife goes.' Mutti clasps her hands in her lap. Her thumb twists constantly, around and around in endless little circles.

"I coaxed them into several layers of underwear and dresses, closing buttons and tying ribbons. They were like obedient children, too stunned to talk. Grandmother even reminded me to water her rubber-tree plant.

"I told her I'd keep it alive for her return." Her lips opened, but she said nothing, just shook her head.

"Their apartment door was sealed as we left. When I asked the Gestapo officer why it's sealed, he told me that, 'The furniture and all possessions were confiscated in the name of the state.'

"The family was taken downstairs. We had only a few minutes before a large open-back truck came, with many adults and about 10 little children. All looked forsaken. One young mother was cradling a crying baby. Oh, I can't talk anymore" Mutti buries her face in her hands, while we watch and weep with her.

Opa swallows a gulp of tea and wipes my eyes with his damp handkerchief.

"Tell us the rest," Oma says, clearing her throat, her arms wrapped around Mutti's shoulder.

"They were holding on to the wooden rail for balance. All wore the blasted black-on-yellow Star of David on their clothing. It was obvious to everyone on the street, that the truck was filled with doomed souls. Let people never say that they

didn't know. All they had to do was to use their eyes," she says angrily. "Our family had to climb up. I was with them to the last desperate moment.

"Then they were gone.

"And I'm left to mourn and remember." She rocks back and forth, arms wrapped around her body. "Whatever bad happened between me and Hans, his parents were always wonderful to me. They welcomed me. Allowed us to live with them when we were thrown out of our apartment I love them dearly And now they are gone -- and we Germans go about our business.

"And nobody seems to care."

I care. My earliest memories take me to my paternal grandparents Ert and their apartment in Berlin. One memory in particular stands out. It is May 1942. Both Oma and Opa Ert greet me at the front door of their apartment. Tiny Oma wipes her hands on her apron, her long gray hair -- which I love to brush -- twisted into a tidy bun. She stands beside my tall, mustached, stately Opa, whose hand is tucked into the lapel of his dark suit. They have loving smiles and hugs for me, their only grandchild.

"Come with me, *Vivilein*; I'm preparing a treat for you," Oma Ert says, and she takes my hand to lead me into my favorite room--the kitchen. I busy myself with pots and pans stored in cabinets under the window, pretending to stir food, while Oma prepares a treat -- my favorite -- sugar swirled in a heated cooking pot until it gets brown and crunchy. After it cools, I eat it by chipping pieces out of the

pot with her.

As usual, Opa waits for me at the desk in the living-room, which is always shady because of the large tree in front of the window. I jump into his lap and play with his pocket watch, an irresistible toy. Then he reads me a story.

And now they are gone.

CHAPTER TWO

NO ONE WILL GET MY CHILDREN

"I'm 11 years older than you," my brother Ali is fond of reminding me.
"Don't touch my stuff."

Mother's apartment at *Bach Strasse* 3 is small, but, she claims that neighbors envy our spacious, flower-filled balcony. Ali and I share a bedroom, which I like, but he doesn't.

One sunny day in the early fall of 1943, I am jumping rope in front of our house with another five-year-old. Magda is giggling because I stumble over my rope.

"Hey you, '*Judenzicke*,' (Jewish goat,) you can't play with real German children. You don't belong on our sidewalk. Go play in the gutter where you do belong," a loud voice calls out.

Magda, wide-eyed, looks at me startled, and covers her mouth with one hand. Dismayed, I turn to face the voice. A blond, older boy wearing *Lederhosen* (leather pants) is glaring at me. I wonder why he's angry at me. I know he's a neighbor's son, but I don't know his name. He faces me and slips two thumbs under his suspenders. "Yes, you," he hisses. "*Judenzicke*."

Humiliated and frightened, I turn away and run upstairs to Mutti.

"Mutti," I sob. "A boy called me a *Judenricke*. What is a *Judenricke*?" A deep frown scores her brow, and her pretty face looks very angry. I cry harder.

"You show me who called you that," she says, as she pulls me along by the hand and returns to the street with me.

"There he is, the one wearing *Lederhosen*," I say. She swiftly reaches him, grabs the boy's shoulder and shakes him making his blond hair stream into his face. "Don't you ever, ever speak to my child again," she screams. Children and passersby are staring at us, and I wish I could melt into the sidewalk. The boy doesn't answer, but stares defiantly at Mutti, whose outburst has silenced the whole street.

"Come," she says to me, and I follow, feeling miserable. Magda turns away as I pass. I wish she would look at me to make me feel less dirty.

In the safety of our living room Mutti's body is trembling. I watch her circle the living room, wringing her hands. My eyes won't stop crying. What did I do to cause such turmoil? I shouldn't have insisted on going out to play. Feeling guilty and sad, I wish I could undo the day. "I promise I won't play outside again," I say, hoping to appease Mutti. She appears not to hear me but speaks almost to herself.

"I shouldn't have lost my temper. When will I ever learn to control myself?" she groans. "If the boy tells his parents, they might report me to the police. And then what.... How could I take such a chance?" She paces to the window and back, her fingers straightening the lace tablecloth on the round, short table. Then she lifts the glass ashtray and brings it to the low table in front of me.

"I promise, I won't go out to play, Mutti, ever again. I'll be good. Please don't

cry," I say. She sits down on the couch next to me, lights a cigarette and picks up her book. I get my doll Röschen and quietly rock her.

Tense hours pass as we wait. Mutti wonders aloud if the boy reported us to his father. "His parents can cause serious trouble for us. People are jailed for lesser offenses, especially when there is a race issue involved," she mumbles. In the eyes of the police the blond boy had every right to call me a "*Judenricke*." If the police are called, our identity papers will be checked, and mine are stamped "*Mishling*," because I am half Jewish. I have a Jewish father and a gentile mother. Had my mother been Jewish and father Aryan, I would be considered a full Jew. The Hitler regime counted the mother's religion as the dominant factor in race evaluation. Thus, whether "*Mishling*" or full Jew, I am considered unimportant, justifying any treatment a German might want to inflict. In one year, at age six, I am to wear the black on yellow "Star of David" on all my clothing to display my Jewish status. This will expose me to public contempt and the law will not be on my side.

Shortly after the "*Judenricke*" incident, Mutti and I are walking towards our apartment house carrying groceries. A neighbor from the first floor -- heavy set Frau Bock with her hat askew -- rushes towards us. "*Frau Ert, die Gestapo war hier um Sie und Ihre Kinder abzuholen, kann ich Ihre Wohnung haben?*" ("Mrs. Ert, the Gestapo were here to pick up your children and you. Can I have your apartment?") She gushes, trying to catch her breath.

Mutti stops walking and stares at Frau Bock. Her hand squeezes mine tightly.

"No one will get my children," she says, her voice hoarse with outrage.

During the following days of November 1943, there are fierce aerial attacks over Berlin. We are in bomb shelters every day. One cold, gray, drizzly morning, returning from a shelter at dawn, we pass a gutted building and climb across a felled tree, which blocks the sidewalk. Wind is blowing soot and ashes into my eyes. In the distance, I hear fire engines, their sirens screaming.

Before me is a huge cloud of dust that hangs over the uneven smoldering mountain of brick, rubble and debris that was once our house. Only a few solid outer walls are all that is left standing from our four-story building. A piece of building exposes cheerfully wall-papered rooms, torn grotesquely apart. A stove and sink hang from a partial wall. I notice a large fractured picture frame clinging to a room partition. I feel rude staring at rooms stripped of privacy. A severed section of the stone staircase I used to climb is still attached to a split of handrail. I picture Ali sailing down this bannister to my delight. Amid the wreckage is a yellow toy truck. I wonder who played with it.

"Oh, no, my beautiful kitchen cupboard lies there," Frau Hackner, a neighbor, points to a smoking black beam covering a white split shell. Once it was trimmed with blue-and-white tile, now, it is cracked in half." Her face is in her hands. "Everything is lost," she moans.

Acrid smoke fills my nostrils, and my eyes burn. I rub them, but that doesn't help. It only makes them hurt more. The air is filled with ash and it hurts to

breathe. Smoke and smoldering wood pour from the ruin of our home.

"It's too silent, there should be a loud protest," Mutti sighs." But to whom should one complain?" She shrugs to herself. "And we need the bombs to end this impossible existence."

"This suitcase is all we have left in the world; all our possessions are destroyed," says Ali, as he drops the battered brown valise he's been clutching. The suitcase only contains precious photographs, important papers, soap, a towel, and one change of clothing for each of us. Mutti slowly shakes her head in disbelief. I hold my doll Röschen tightly; she's my favorite, but I feel sad about the doll I left in my bedroom.

"Mutti, where will we go now? How can Papa visit me if he doesn't know where am?" I ask.

"We'll live with Oma and Opa, until I figure something out," she says, straining to hear Herr Kessel. "This is the second time I've been bombed," he yells, shouting advice based on his earlier experience.

"You can sift through the debris but not with your hands. Use a broom or a pot because there is a lot of broken glass, and it's easy to get hurt. If you come across someone who is wounded or dead, call for help. Don't move anyone on your own. Let's clear an area on the street and collect anything we find. We all have to help each other."

The dazed people spread out. Crackling, crunching sounds of stomping shoes cut the stillness. Neighbors climb over beams and sink into smoldering debris,

working intensely, to recover belongings. Mutti and Ali gingerly poke, stir and sift through rubble and ashes for pieces of our life. Ali finds three of our dented cooking pots.

Frau Bock stumbles over a couch spewing stuffing and moans that it is only two years old. Mutti ignores her.

There are no fatalities but everyone, including the disappointed Frau Bock, is without shelter or possessions. Gray, black-smudged faces and clothing make us all look and smell alike.

CHAPTER THREE

MOMMY PROTECT ME

I tip toe down a long dark corridor lined with shiny, slippery doors. Fear won't let me open a door. Papa is behind one of them and I must find him. It's my responsibility to discover him. I must find him. I have to tell him something. My lips mouth words. Finally, I push. With both hands I push. My heart is pounding. It feels like it will explode in my chest. My mouth tries to scream. No sound comes out.

I sit up in the dark room; clocks tick all around me. Close by, two cuckoo chimes echo.

"It's all right," I reassure myself. I just had a bad dream. It was the dream I often have of searching for my father. I lie back and calm myself, by thinking about Papa's last visit.

He surprised me Tuesday, early in the morning. Papa's rare visit was a huge surprise. There is no regular time for me to see him, every visit is always unexpected. Oma just finished building the morning fire on the stove for her pot of

ersatz coffee.

The door bell rings.

"I'll get it," Opa says, and shuffles to the door in his slippers.

"Come in Hans," I hear.

"Papa," I cry out and rush into his arms. He swings me in the air and carries me into the kitchen. Without removing his coat, he sits across from Opa at the large white table.

"Have you heard any news of your parents?" Opa asks.

"No," says Papa, shaking his head sadly, as he touches my hand. Papa says he'll take me on a little adventure. I rush to my room to finish dressing. I don't want to miss one moment of precious time with Papa.

After the bombing of our house on *Bach Strasse*, we moved in with Mutti's parents, Oma and Opa Gimpel. Mutti found a small apartment in an area closer to the heart of the city and her present job as secretary for a film company. I continue to live with my grandparents. Since Mutti renounced the Jewish religion, she no longer has to work at the Siemens factory.

My brother Ali lives with her, close to his forced-labor job. Because of his *Mishling* status, he is forced to work for a construction company alongside other "privileged" Jews and prisoners-of-war. Jews can no longer work for Aryan Germans and neither can Aryan Germans work for Jews. Initially, he was to shovel sand into wheel barrels and push it to the workers who were mixing mortar. Although he is 16- years- old, he is small and frail, having succumbed to several pneumonia infections since a scarlet fever episode as a toddler. The foreman at the

construction site realized that Ali did not have the strength for constant shoveling and kindly changed his job to assist a French prisoner of war who drives a truck to various work sites in the city.

Ali is not allowed to attend school because he is a *Mishling*. In earlier years he had to attend a Jewish school, but that has been abolished, because there aren't enough Jewish children left to educate. Ali visits us occasionally on Sundays when he doesn't have to work.

My grandparents live at *Wörther Strasse 17-18* in East Berlin near *Alexander Platz*. They are Lutheran. My aunt Gerda, mother's sister, also lives with us. I call her Tante Gerda. Opa repairs clocks and watches; I sleep in his workshop room. At the moment there is a tall grandfather clock in the middle of my room. It was thrown on its face during a bomb attack. The owner of the clock brought it to Opa for major repair. Opa has worked on the clock for several weeks. Sometimes he lets me help him, by steadying the pendulum as he balances the "clock's stomach." I have to keep my toys in a small chest when not in use, because he receives customers in the room where I sleep.

My favorite clock is a cuckoo clock, which hangs opposite my bed. When I return from an air-raid shelter, I look for the cuckoo bird. It reassures me to see it still hanging in its usual spot. I like to hear all the clock sounds. I like to watch my Opa bent over his worktable with a loupe clamped in his eye, as he examines a clock's "sick stomach." It is a comforting image as I fall asleep.

Papa, Oma, and Opa talk in hushed voices when I return to the kitchen, fully

dressed, with my winter coat, hat and gloves. February is cold and windy in Berlin. "I have a feeling that everybody is dead," I hear Papa say, but he grins as he turns to me. "Ready *Puppilein*?" (dolly) "?" He draws in a deep breath, picks me up and says, "Let's go."

High from his shoulder, I lean down to kiss Oma goodbye. Papa slips a pack of cigarettes into Oma's apron pocket, but her frown doesn't turn into a smile. Going downstairs, I ask him who is dead.

"I was talking about some people I love," he says. "Bad things are happening," and he kisses the tip of my nose. Then he tells me that he visited Zito recently, our black- and- tan German shepherd. Zito is being kept by Papa's friends who own a house and yard in Berlin.

"Zito looks good," Papa says, "and what a smart dog he is. You know, when you were a baby, we could leave you in your carriage outside of shops, while we shopped for food. In his care, you were as safe as can be. He allowed people to look at you; but if they reached into the carriage, look out. His growl was deep and low. That's all the warning anyone needed to back away from the carriage." Papa kisses my cheek; "I miss Zito and the old days," he says.

"I don't remember the old days," I say, wishing I still had a big dog as my protector. "I guess you don't," he says. "I, myself, can hardly remember normal life. It all seems so long ago now."

When we get to the street, the sky is gray and overcast. "It looks like it will snow," Papa predicts, sticking his hand out in front of us. "It sure has snowed a lot since the first of the year." I feel something hard bang against my leg as he carries

me. When he lifts me into the large truck, bigger than anything I have ever been in, I see a curved, wood handle protrude from under his jacket.

"What's that in your belt?" I ask.

"Oh, just a little insurance in case there is trouble," he says. "Have you seen your mother?"

"Not since Christmas," I answer, as the truck rumbles along the cobblestone street. "Have you?"

"No, I don't see your mother much. It's too dangerous. We live in dangerous, times you know."

"Yes, I know," I answer, bouncing on the front seat shouting to be heard.

"I've had serious trouble with the Gestapo."

"But you were lucky, weren't you, Papa?" I interrupt.

"Yes and no, *Puppilein*," he says, tilting his head toward me. "I make my own luck, and I was also lucky." He strokes my head, "I'll tell you all about it when you're a little older." The truck shudders to a stop in front of a white house, framed by bare trees.

"I'm taking you to a restaurant owned by my friend Paul Schmidt. I owe this man my life and he's the one who keeps Zito for us."

I don't know exactly what he means about owing his life to Paul Schmidt, but I like his confidential tone as he carries me through an empty dining room.

"Tables are set for the dinner crowd," Papa says. A push on a brown door opens into the large, gleaming kitchen. I pass a huge oven and large utility table. Pots and pans hang over it, like a fancy chandelier. I love being carried by Papa,

whose strong right arm is curled under me like a seat. He is the only person who carries me because I am too heavy for Opa. Up close, I inhale his spicy perfume mingled with cigarette smoke. I kiss his rough cheek. He blinks his eye lashes against my cheek and calls it a butterfly kiss. I am giddy with joy.

Morning light filters through high, milky-glass windows. The kitchen is silent. We are alone. He places me into a very large free-standing frying pan, pushes a red button, and to my delight, the pan automatically sways me from side to side.

"The swaying mingles the butter, onions and potatoes as they fry," Papa explains. "That's how Paul cooks *Bauernfrüstück*, (farmers breakfast) for his customers. One day I will make you my version, with sausage and eggs. It's very tasty." My pleated skirt fans out, filling the pan. I giggle, as Papa pretends to stir me as if I am an egg. Our fun is interrupted when a tall stocky man, wearing a green loden jacket, enters the kitchen. He smiles at me, as he places a dish of pink-colored pudding on my lap. The pudding is topped with a raisin.

"I found a little treat for you," he says, winking at me. "Paul Schmidt at your service, Fräulein Ert." He clicks his heels together and kisses the back of my hand with an elaborate bow. My hand feels tiny, swallowed up in his thick, strong palm. I am delighted by the attention as I sit in the pan, feet swinging high above the floor. Papa brings me a spoon and puts his arm around Paul's shoulder.

"Have you any idea when you'll need me?" he asks, patting his waist.

Paul nods. "Tonight. The transport is ready. The kitchen staff will be here in half an hour," he says, checking his wrist watch. Papa tells him that he will return as soon as he brings me home. I wish the morning could last forever; but when my

pudding is finished, Papa picks me up, places me on the floor and takes me by the hand. I wish he would carry me, but I don't complain.

Large wipers slide snow from one side of the truck window to the other.

"Will you go out and build a snow man?" he asks me.

"Probably," I say, feeling poutful because our time together is over.

"I have an old hat that I'll bring next time I see you. You can use it on your snow man." I am happier because it sounds like he'll come back soon. As we pull up to *Wörther Strasse*, he leans over and kisses my cheek, and I hop out of the truck. He kisses his hand and blows me a kiss, as I turn and run into our house.

We live on the third floor of a walk-up, four- floor building, which has three apartments per floor. Oma opens the door even before I ring the bell. After depositing my coat in the white hall closet, I follow her down the creaky dark hallway into the kitchen. I chatter about sitting in a fry pan, while she stirs a large pot of cabbage soup.

"What did you do while I was gone?" I ask.

"Frau Arent and I played a duet on the piano," Oma says. "She heard me play while you were gone, and asked if we could play together."

"I didn't even know that Frau Arent plays the piano," says Opa, eyes twinkling at me, when he enters the kitchen. "I had quite a morning concert, my 'General' plays well." He winks at Oma. "General," is Opa's favorite nickname for her because he claims that Oma is bossy.

"When you're big enough to reach the pedals, I will teach you to play," Oma

says to me, removing her glasses and wiping them on her apron. Her face is severe; with dark hair pulled away from her ears, except for some unmanageable ringlets.

Because of the war, housing is scarce, and by law, rooms have to be rented out. What formerly was a maid's room and bath, has been rented to gray-haired Frau Arent. She is a widow whose husband was killed when their house was bombed in the fall of 1943. Frau Arent frequently visits her sister in another town, cooks on a hot plate when home, and keeps to herself. We almost forget that she's there, because she uses what was once the servant's entrance. Our large living room contains the piano which my Oma occasionally plays.

"Cabbage soup again?" complains Tante Gerda, carrying a bucket of coal up from the cellar. Oma is bent over the open oven door, and she taps a hot bread with her forefinger. "It's done when it sounds hollow," she tells me while glancing sternly at Gerda. "We are lucky to be eating," she reprimands.

Since every negative comment can be reported to the police and construed as a treasonous remark, no one complains about food shortages aloud, although severe rationing is in effect for everyone. People scour parks and country roads to pick weeds and cook them as spinach soup.

The military has food priority over civilian needs. All foods are rationed, especially, milk, eggs, sugar, flour, rice, farina and potatoes. Ali's and my ration cards are more restricted than those of my grandparents because of our *Mishling* status. We don't get rations of precious meat or sausages, and no milk, eggs or butter.

I have heard people claim that Mutti is pretty, but her younger sister, Gerda, is beautiful. Gerda has pale skin, deep blue eyes and auburn hair. My mother, Elli, is feisty and adventuresome. Gerda is the family peacemaker. Oddly, they both gave their hearts to Jewish men, which, for Lutheran girls, was very risky, considering the times. Gerda has been faithful to Rudi Löwenthal for years, in spite of the dangers. Rudi lives in hiding since his sister and mother were picked up from the apartment they had all shared. I see him at our place quite often.

I heard Mutti warn Tante Gerda that she'd seen men and women paraded on *Kurfürstendamm*, one of Berlin's major streets, wearing large placards that stated that they are guilty of *Rassenschande*, (race contamination), because they slept with men or women of the Jewish faith.

Strictly forbidden under Nazi law.

When Mutti visited us at Christmas time, she told Oma that in the city's center, she'd seen corpses strung from street lights with signs hung around their neck that said. "Refused to serve in Hitler's army."

The shrill rising and falling sound of the air raid siren wail pushes me out of my bed. An attack is coming. Although I always sleep with my head burrowed under the cover, the frightening whine grips me instantly. The fear of bomb attacks mingled with the winter coldness does not allow the luxury of a slow, lazy awakening; instead, every night, I sleep half-dressed, so we can hustle to safety 10 blocks away.

Each district has selected sentries who take turns standing guard on rooftops, looking out for oncoming planes. A sighting activates the air raid alarm.

In addition, radio alerts frequently come from the cities of Braunschweig and Hannover. Experience has taught Opa that an attack over Berlin will begin 20 minutes after Allied planes are sighted up North.

We hurry to reach a shelter. Opa gives a reluctant Nazi salute as we pass the shelter inspector. Everyone knows that civil disobedience can be deadly. We spend the remainder of the night in the large, stale-smelling, concrete underground hall, which is dimly lit by candle or kerosene light. As we wait for the attack to pass, we sit on long benches or lie on cots when we can get one. I cringe, waiting for the next bomb to explode.

As I use my *Puppen Lappen* (cloth scraps) to dress my doll, Oma tells me long stories. "There once was a handsome Prince.... is how all of Oma's stories begin. I often picture Papa as my dashing Prince, galloping on a white horse and slaying evil dragons who are holding me against my will. He always saves me. If Oma alters a single word in the tale, I correct her. Sometimes, a girl named Vivi, is the powerful rescuer, riding a white horse and breaking through a hedge of thorns that surround my captured Papa. I rescue and protect him forever and ever with my faithful dog, Zito.

After the attack passes, the all-clear siren sounds, and the bomb shelter

releases us. It is early Sunday morning. I wake up clutching my doll, with my head on Oma's lap and my feet on Opa's lap. Ali is with us. He came for a visit on Saturday evening and spent the night in the shelter with Sonja, the girl he likes. She lives across the street from us on Wörther Strasse. He joins us as we leave. People crowd the exit; everybody is eager to assess the bomb damage on their block. Snow is falling, and as we trudge home, our boots sink deep in the fresh snow. My head is wrapped in a long shawl, and my hands are gloved and buried in a muff Oma made me from an old fur scarf.

"Either this is the coldest winter ever, or I'm getting old. Probably both," Opa mutters, stamping his feet to improve circulation. "It is still a long time until spring. I yearn for flowers, green leaves and peace I mean victory." These days Opa talks only about the weather if there is any chance of being overheard. He has been more cautious since Herr Haase from across the street reported him to the police. Herr Haase falsely claimed that my grandfather said, "*Scheiss auf den Führer Adolf Hitler*," (Shit on the Führer,) while having a beer in the corner tavern.

For two days, Mutti waited in vain for his release before going to the police station to visit him. She used the excuse that she needed the barn keys to feed my grandfather's horses. With Mutti's intervention, Opa was finally released. Ever since, Opa is very careful about what he says in public.

"I would have been crazy to make such a statement," he complained to Oma upon his release. "I've never liked that Haase jerk, and he obviously doesn't like me. I guess he took his revenge, that Nazi scum." He ran his hand over his short

mustache, sipped from a glass of Schnapps, and invited me to climb on his lap while he talked to Oma.

"Can you imagine," he said, "I met a man at the police station whose sixteen-year-old son reported him. He said his father's remarks were derogatory towards Hitler. The father was jailed that evening. He shared my cell." Opa sputters with outrage and slaps the kitchen table, rattling Oma's coffee cup.

" 'My only son is my enemy,' the poor guy complained. 'Ever since he joined the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth), he's an enemy in a brown shirt, always criticizing us for not joining the Nazi party. He reported me to the police for speaking honestly to my wife in my own home. I don't ever want to talk to him again,' but sadly, I'm afraid of the brown shirt. His personality changed as soon as he put that damn brown outfit on.'

"If he were mine ... Oh, I don't know what I'd do," Opa says.

"Thank God that's not one of our problems," Oma said. "Furthermore, not being supportive of Hitler is grounds for divorce in this crazy country." After that comment, Opa picked up the newspaper and gently shoved me off his lap. He hasn't talked about his jail time since.

The all-clear siren still wails as we walk away from the shelter. Ali walks impatiently, swinging the suitcase around himself in a circle, knowing that it irritates Opa. Fire engine sirens howl. I concentrate on the crunching sound of my footsteps on the frosty sidewalk.

Turning a corner at the end of the street, I see another apartment house

leveled during the night. Only a shell of brick and steel is left. I figure out that the scratches on the side of a fallen beam used to spell out *Bäckerei*. (bakery.)

The adjacent building is still smoldering and most of the windows are shattered. The air is heavy with smoke. My eyes smart. The pungent smell is in my mouth and it hurts to breathe. At Oma's suggestion I scoop a handful of snow in my scarf and hold it in front of my lips. Wherever I look, firemen and civilians are busy pumping air into the ruins to create oxygen for buried victims. "The oxygen will help keep them breathing until they can be reached, but I fear that the raid took many lives," Opa explains. Men and women are gathering bricks and lifting heavy beams from the ruin.

The street is swarming with stunned people as neighbors come along, glad to help, because they are relieved that their house wasn't hit this night. Opa hands Oma the suitcase and tells her to take me home.

"Ali and I will stay and help. It will probably take us all night," he says, blowing warm breath into his gloved hands. I watch him join a human chain of moonlit people, exchanging buckets of splashing water till the last bucket reaches the fire. Fire trucks are in desperate demand all over the city, and many more houses will be destroyed if neighbors don't help each other. We watch until the cold wind chases us home.

As we pass ruined houses, Oma points to innumerable inscriptions in chalk that have appeared on the blackened walls of wrecked houses; "Dear Gila E., where are you? You can stay with me, M. "Everyone in this cellar was saved." "I am staying with M.F. in Schöneberg, H. W." "Does anyone know where Frau S. B. F.

is?" Gradually, as people return to their homes and read these messages, answers will start to appear, chalked underneath, Oma explains.

The next nights are foggy, and the roof watch is unreliable during fog, snow, or rain. Frequently, the shrill siren calls as the planes approach, and we are trapped in our house. Mutti, who is visiting, is trapped with us, because she can't take the train back to her place during an air raid.

Packed suitcase in hand, we collide with other house residents who are also rushing to the cellar. Sitting on a long bench and using the gray cement wall as a backrest, Oma and Mutti play cards with me as we wait for the attack to pass.

Four sisters who live in our apartment house invite me to their spread-out blanket. The sisters live on the second floor, and Lotte, the youngest one, is my best friend. She is five and a half, just like me. But she doesn't always want to play with me because she has a live-in play mate, her eight year old sister Astrid. Lotte is the only one with really long hair, which is generally braided in tight, blond coils that pucker her skin. Her sister, Ruth, at 16, is too old for us. She waves her hair daily with a hot iron and she always reads romance novels in the cellar, books that make her close her eyes and smile. Ursula, at 13, feels she's closer in age to Ruth. She likes to boss us around, but she's not allowed to touch Ruth's books. As we play with our dolls, the planes flying overhead aren't as scary as usual. In our fantasy world it is easier to ignore crashes, which everyone hopes are occurring elsewhere.

During a pause in attacks, my Oma goes upstairs to get us food. Suddenly, without warning, we hear a loud whistle, followed by a cracking boom. The walls in

our cellar tremble, even the floor moves. Everyone freezes. I don't notice that I have bitten my lips hard enough to draw blood. After what seems like an hour, but probably is only minutes, Oma returns trembling.

"A grenade came through the living room wall; it missed hitting me by a second," she stammers. Opa jumps up and takes the food bag out of her shaking hands. He places a bottle of water and half a loaf of bread on the table.

"The hole is large enough for Vivi to fall out," she says. "It will have to be plastered soon." She presses her temples with both hands, as if to lock out pain. "The explosion made the flower stand topple, as well as our breakfront. Our room is quite a mess," she exclaims.

"Never mind the room; I'm glad you're not hurt. I dread to think what could have happened to you." He gently leads her to the bench and places a sweater around her shoulders. "You went for food, dear, so what were you doing in the living room?"

"I wanted to surprise Vivi with new *Puppen Lappen* so we could make a doll's dress, and they were in our bedroom," she replies, her voice shaking slightly. "Luckily I made it back in one piece. By the way, Opa," she says, trying to sound casual again, as she pours herself a glass of water and offers me one, "this is the rainwater from our balcony. You were right about gathering water in the caskets. It's a good idea."

Herr Keller from the fourth floor always repeats the latest radio transmissions. He coughs and clears his throat to get everyone's attention. "I heard on the radio this morning that we are winning the war. It came direct from the

Führer," he says, polishing his *Hakenkreuz* (Swastika) lapel pin with the back of his hand. No one in the cellar dares to doubt his report, and they most fervently want to believe it. We all have heard about the day he saw Hitler close enough to look into his "valiant eyes" during a parade. Herr Polder, the shoemaker, walks over to him. They sit down and are in a deep conversation with lots of gesturing. They always discuss the latest battles reported on the radio propaganda station. Oma pulls her wicker basket closer and hums under her breath, while she darns socks. Stitch pull, stitch pull. She weaves the black yarn through torn material while Opa repairs a "sick" wristwatch.

"Clocks are delicate and get many stomach upsets" he tells me. In addition, he frequently reminds me that, "No-one in the house knows of your Jewish father or any Jewish connections we have. Our world is full of Nazis," is the oft-repeated warning in the privacy of our kitchen. Neighbors think that my parents divorced because my father moved far, far away. "Don't tell anyone anything," is the daily reminder.

"Vivi, you need a bath," Mutti says restlessly many hours later, closing her book with a loud thud.

"That's too dangerous," Oma protests. "You saw what happened to me a couple of hours ago." But Mutti raises a palm. "Excuse me," she says. "I'm still her mother. I have to do something. Anything."

During a lull, she takes me upstairs. Mutti fetches a sponge, soap, towel and a clean set of clothing, while I stick my head into the living room to see the hole made by the grenade. Around the huge opening, plaster has fallen off the walls

revealing wooden beams and rough stone. Mutti calls me impatiently, and I rush into the kitchen where she is pouring water from the kettle into a large bowl on the kitchen table. She hoists me up, and I climb into the basin filled with lukewarm water.

It's fun being bathed by Mutti. These days we don't spend much time together, and I can't remember when she last washed me. When my head is soapy, she sprinkles water over my head with a watering can, making me giggle. I gather some suds from my head and dot her nose white.

Suddenly a plane drones overhead, and she stops playing. I look at her waiting for more water, but see a deep frown and set mouth. The shrieking whistle of a bomb, followed by an earsplitting crash is frighteningly close. I hunch down and cover my ears as a yellow stream mingles with my bath water.

"Mutti schütze mich" (Mommy protect me,") I cry out in fear. She scoops me up with the towel and shoves me into the square opening under the brick stove. I lie curled up like a ball and feel Mutti's rapid breath on my neck. "I'll protect you; don't be afraid," she whispers in my ear. "The planes will pass without hurting you." Her body covers mine until the immediate danger passes, and we return to the cellar.

CHAPTER FOUR

I LOSE MY UNCLE HERBERT

My eyes snap open. I know today is the day Mutti will come to visit me. Climbing out of bed, I choose a white sweater and plaid wool skirt, with long white wool stockings. April is still cold, even though the linden trees have new leaves. As I enter the kitchen, Oma reminds me that my Uncle Herbert is also coming. She's twisting Hitler's face on a newspaper to build the morning fire with the help of four pieces of coal from the black bucket. I am hungry for the slice of bread, spread with margarine and a sprinkling of sugar, that is waiting for me on the kitchen table.

After breakfast, I stir onions and tiny pieces of meat in the big pot, while Oma cuts potatoes for today's soup. Steam clouds our kitchen window. It is late morning when the door bell rings. I rush to answer it. Mutti's blue eyes sparkle, as she smiles and gives me a big hug and kiss. She pulls a candy out of her purse, unrolls something red and fruity smelling, and pops it into my mouth. Uncle Herbert stands behind her and looks much thinner since I last saw him. Two sharp lines pull down the corners of his mouth. When I kiss his cold cheek, I notice that his light brown hair is thin on top.

"You need a good sandwich before you go anywhere," Oma directs,

inspecting him from all sides. "Vivi isn't quite finished with her lunch, so please sit down and eat with her. How is it going Herbert?" She places her hand on his shoulder but he doesn't remove his coat, explaining that he's always chilly.

Mutti shrugs off her raincoat and folds it over the back of her chair. She goes into Opa's workshop to tell him that lunch is ready. She brings our filled soup bowls to the kitchen table, careful not to spill anything on her tight blue dress.

"Oh, this underground lifestyle is wearing me down, especially the constant hiding from the Gestapo and nosy neighbors wherever I stay." Herbert says, taking a salami sandwich from the center plate and sinking his teeth into bread. Opa, with white shirt sleeves characteristically rolled up, greets him.

"I feel eyes everywhere, piercing, knowing eyes, just waiting to turn me in." Herbert removes his glasses, leans back in the chair and squeezes the bridge of his nose. Oma takes his glasses to the sink and rinses them. He looks very sad. I don't see any resemblance to my father, although they are first cousins. His hair is much lighter, and unlike Papa's, is parted in the middle.

"It's strange. One day I'm happily walking around this city. I have a mother, father, sister, a family," he says, staring toward the window. "We live. We work. We visit. We obey the general law of the land, and then ... orders come from the government to wear a star on our clothing. We can't move from our apartments without permission from the police. We can't be outdoors after curfew, we have to surrender our pets. The list goes on and on How and why is this happening? It makes no sense." Herbert stops talking and chews listlessly, staring into empty space.

Mutti sighs, nodding, "I haven't heard anything from or about any of the Erts

since August of 42, almost two years ago."

"Two years of hiding for me, says Herbert. People just ... disappear. The Gestapo opens their mouth and swallows us without a trace." He replaces his glasses and thanks Oma for cleaning them. "I'm terrified every time a passerby glances at me. I feel guilty for wanting to stay alive. You can't hide from the Gestapo. I wonder why I bother; everyone else is gone."

"I never saw you wear glasses," Mutti says, leaning across the table. He looks up at her while she refills his soup plate.

"I tried to change my looks to match my false papers. That's why my hair is parted in the middle. I still have trouble getting used to combing it this way," he says, touching his head lightly with a deep sigh. "I am also running out of places to hide. Some friends were very kind to me, but they, too, are now homeless, having lost their home to bombs."

"You can always stay at my place," Mutti offers.

"Well, I've done that and will again, but you have enough trouble with the Gestapo as it is. They are more likely to check your place than some other sources I still have." He smiles at Mutti, and pats her hand. "You have a good heart, Elli; my cousin is a fool," he says, checking his watch.

"Thank you, Frau Gimpel," he says, patting his stomach. "My ever-hungry friend and I thank you for the delicious salami sandwich and soup. I never knew horse meat could taste this good. How did you manage to get it?"

"Ever since I was in the service, under Kaiser Wilhelm," Opa says, "did you know I was in the horse division?" Herbert shakes his head no. "Well, I still have

connections with my old horse buddies, and they slip me some meat or horse salami whenever possible."

"I don't think Herbert wanted to know all that," Oma chuckles. "But you can call me Oma like everyone else," she says, kissing his cheek. "Take care of yourself, Herbert. Vivi put your coat on and go to the bathroom once more."

It is cold, even in the April sunlight. Mutti takes sunglasses out of her coat pocket while I squint as I walk in the middle, holding on to both their hands. It is easy to pretend that we are a family.

"Today will be an adventure," Mutti promises. "You'll see many horses." As I turn the corner onto *Rykestrasse*, we pass a dairy and I point out to Uncle Herbert that the cows are being milked in the courtyard. "Oma and I bring buckets of potato and vegetable peels to the dairy, in exchange for kindling wood." I tell him. "We walk right past the row of cow rumps toward the center of the courtyard, and dump our peels into that bin over there," I jabber and point to a long trough. He pats my head. I don't think he's listening to me. I ask Mutti if I'll meet other children my age, and she says she doesn't think there will be many who are five years old. I remind her that I am already five and a half.

We are nearing the U Bahn and Uncle Herbert teasingly calls me his *Kleine s Mäuschen* (little mouse) as he swings me up the front steps. They find two seats on the train, which isn't crowded. I like sitting on his lap anyway.

"Do you still play the harmonica?" I ask, remembering that when I used to visit his parents, Uncle Max would rock me on his lap and tell Aunt Bertha to make

cocoa for me. Uncle Herbert and his sister Hanna would take me to a park, and Uncle Herbert played songs on his harmonica for me.

"No *Mäuschen*" he says, "I haven't been in the mood lately. One day I hope I can play for you again," he says, raising his collar around his ears.

"Today should be pleasant," he says, turning to Mutti, while he strokes my arm. "I feel safer among crowds of people because it is easy to blend in. I am most vulnerable walking alone on a street. I try to avoid that. Have you talked to Hans lately?"

"No," Mutti says, fidgeting with her gloves. "He's living with his new love, Mia. I haven't seen him since the first Sunday in January when I had planned an outing for Vivi, Ali and myself. We were going to pick up Zito, our German shepherd, from his boarding home with Paul Schmidt, and take him for a good run in the *Tiergarten*, (park,) bombs permitting of course," she says looking skyward as more passengers board the train.

"Hans shows up at my mother's flat, with Zito, to visit Vivi unannounced, of course. It has been a long time since he last saw Ali or Vivi, but that is understandable. I prefer he not see Vivi at all because he endangers everyone with his presence. Anyway, he joined us. I had my camera and took some pictures, a nice one of Vivi, Hans and Zito. I do love that dog, and wish that I could afford to feed him," she says, absently stroking her purse.

"Hans has an easier time living underground than you do. I think that he pretends that our present life is a game of hide and seek, and he wants to win," she says.

"This is our stop," Herbert says. "Maybe I'll win today's game. I can certainly use the money for my expensive lifestyle," he says with an ironic grin. "The scary thing is that sometimes I feel a certain sense of safety that I know I can't afford. Today, for instance, I feel fairly secure."

The train empties rapidly. It seems that everyone has the same goal. Herbert is coughing and searches his pockets.

"Do you want a handkerchief?" Mutti asks. "Are you feeling all right, Herbert? You don't look well."

"Just a chest cold I can't shake," he says, giving her a lopsided smile and shaking his head wearily, a handkerchief pressed to his mouth. We are not walking for long. The crowd is in a hurry and knows the way. I see a large black-on-white sign, skip over to it and read aloud. *Berliner Rennbahn* (Berlin Racetrack) I am proud that my Oma's lessons are bringing results.

The arena is teeming with bustling, festive people. I hold Mutti tightly by the hand, afraid of getting separated. I hear my shoes make gritty sounds, as if walking on crushed glass when I get to the fence, close to the prancing horses. They are beautiful, snorting horses, decorated with braided manes or long, free-flowing hair. I pick a white horse with a smooth mane as my favorite, because of the bright blue cover over part of his head that allows his ears to stick up, while wings shade his eyes. I think he looks like my fairy tale horse. A tiny man is holding the gigantic horses reins as he walks him. The horses are impressive; their fur shines much more than street horses. All wear bright, silky covers, that would make wonderful *Puppen Lappen*.

A loudspeaker is announcing the end of a race. I hear a loud cheer and watch smiling people shout and applaud as they rush to the ticket counters. The beautiful horses release clouds of steam. Their elegant tails swish back and forth, like a fancy lady's fan. Small men in bright red, yellow, blue and green colors walk horses around the arena of the track. Bold numbers are visible on the horse covers. The loudspeaker reminds the crowd to buy their tickets.

Number seven, my white horse, is led to the starting gate along with the others. A bell rings for the new race.

"For a little mouse you're holding my hand mighty tight," Mutti says with a laugh. She stops talking, as she watches a tall good-looking man with prominent ears walk towards us. The gravel crunches noisily beneath his feet.

"Oh, it's Herr Friedman," she says to me. "I don't like him, although I can't tell you why."

"Hello, Frau Ert, how are you? Quite a beautiful day isn't it? I think spring is going to be early this year, don't you agree?" Without waiting for an answer he continues. "What brings you out here today. Are you alone?"

"No, I'm here with my husband's cousin Herbert," she points with her finger and says. "He's over there in line buying our tickets."

"I never see your husband, Hans, anymore. How does he manage to hide?"

"We are divorced," Mutti says with a shrug. "I don't see him or hear from him." She moves us away from him. He walks with her and keeps on talking.

"Surely Hans visits his pretty little daughter," he says, and bends down to ruffle my hair. "What's your name, young lady?" I don't like him ruffling my hair,

and tell Mutti I have to use the bathroom. Impatiently, she checks the ticket line, and I see that Uncle Herbert is next in line to buy a ticket.

Friedman leaves us and walks to the sideline. Two men join him. He tells them something and with his finger points out Uncle Herbert.

A loud cheer erupts in the gallery. Mutti's body stiffens. Her hand squeezes mine.

"Oh please, no, " she cries out. People nearby turn to stare at us. They probably think her outburst is directed at me, a naughty child aggravating her mother. At that moment, in front of our horrified, helpless eyes, the two men go up to Herbert, take him by the elbows and swiftly walk away.

I stare at his resigned shoulders wedged between the men.

Mutti kneels in front of me, burying her face in her hands. "Quietly, without calling attention to ourselves, we have to walk back to the train station and return home immediately. Don't ask me any questions now and don't cry." Silently I walk on the same pavement that my feet skipped over a short while ago.

On the deserted train I sit close to mother and feel her tears drip on my hand. "Why Mutti?"

Deep sighs are her answer.

"Friedman is a *"Spitzel"* (a people catcher) acting as a spy for the Nazis, although he, too, is Jewish," she finally whispers. "I've heard of people like him. As an informer, he has a daily quota of Jews to turn in. He is trying to prolong his life by ending others. He is the lowest form of humanity."

CHAPTER FIVE

DANGEROUS TIMES

"Have you heard from Papa? He never visits me," I pout. "A whole month has passed since Uncle Herbert was taken from us at the racetrack. Since then I haven't seen Mutti or Papa or heard anything about Uncle Herbert."

"Your father is in great danger," Oma says. "The Gestapo are after him. It is better for you not to know anything about him. You just have to trust us about that."

I am always intensely curious when Papa's name is mentioned because I am so starved for news about him.

Then Oma explains that Mutti is very busy with her job. "She is traveling and can't visit us for a while." That's an acceptable explanation for me because I am used to Mutti slipping in and out of my life.

In the middle of May, Papa pays a surprise visit. Oma is in the kitchen, stirring bed linen in a huge kettle, using both hands to move the fat wooden paddle in hot soapy liquid. She doesn't seem happy to see him, but I am thrilled.

"I want to take Vivi out for a short while," he says. "I won't keep her long."

I run to get my sweater from my room and hear Oma whisper when I return. "She's in jail since the third of May." I wonder who is in jail.

He shakes his head and says, "I am really sorry about that, but they haven't found me yet. Besides, because she doesn't know anything, she can't give anything away." He smiles at me. "I need to see my child for a little while," he says. "You know every time can be the last. Don't be angry with me, I won't be reckless with her." He hugs me and picks me up with a swoop saying, "Come *Puppilein*. We don't have much time." I love his familiar smell and feel his warm breath against my face. Long dark eyelashes blink over brown eyes, so near to me. I can't stop smiling. Papa helps me climb into a gray car. The upholstery between us is slashed, white stuffing is peeking through.

"Did your car get hurt?" I ask. "Yes I had a little trouble," he says. "Nothing to worry about. We'll go for a short ride," he adds, lighting a cigarette with a gold-colored lighter. "You can roll the window down if you like. How are you doing? Are you being a good girl for your Oma?"

"Yes," I answer. "Do you know what happened to Uncle Herbert?"

"Yes," he nods, "you see far too much for a little girl. I'm afraid you're being robbed of your childhood," he says, reaching over and stroking my shoulder. "I guess it's better that, than your life.... We live in dangerous times, *Puppi*." He rolls his window down. I watch him blow smoke out of the window.

"Did you know I was bombed again?" he asks me. "I lost everything. That's why I haven't seen you for a long time. You know it's dangerous for me to come to you; it's not that I don't miss you or want to be with you. You know that, don't you

Puppilein? He seems anxious for an answer.

"I know, Papa," I nod. When I'm with Papa all my doubts vanish. But when I'm not with him they creep back. I've never told him about my daydreams or night dreams. There's never enough time.

"I have to tell you something that happened while I was driving a friend's car," Papa says. "I think you're old enough now to comprehend it. You're getting bigger every time I see you. Why you're almost six years old," he says, playfully tweaking my cheek. "Two years ago, when Jews were ordered to turn in their driver's license, I never turned mine in. I was not going to give up my right to drive a car and support myself. Anyway, on the morning of January 11, 1943, I pulled up to a friend's house, on *Heilbronner Strasse*. When I knocked on my friend's door, the Gestapo opened the door instead of my friend. I had to show them my license which identified me as a Jew, and they arrested me on the spot." I gasp with horror and cover my mouth with my hands. Papa reaches for a packet of cigarettes, and the striking of the lighter sounds like a loud crack. It makes me jump. After what seems like a long silence, he continues.

"They took me by the arm and marched me around the corner to a waiting truck. While I sat in the truck, the SS swept through apartments, streets and houses, arresting every Jew they found." Papa wipes his face with a handkerchief and wipes away a tear on my cheek.

"Did they hurt you in the truck?" I ask, glancing out of the rear window to see if anyone is following us. I only see a horse-drawn buggy.

"No. One SS sat in the truck with us, waving a pointed gun. We were not

allowed to talk among ourselves," he looks at me with a grin. "No one was in a chatty mood anyway." When the truck was full, they drove us to the *Grosse Hamburger* building, as it is called. Now a jail, but formerly an old-age home which backed onto the oldest Jewish cemetery in Berlin. I was jailed and spent time in a crowded cell.

"After a couple of days passed, we were taken downstairs to the cemetery grounds to be transported. I guess we were 50 or 60 men waiting for transport trucks to take us to the train station and then straight to the *Weimar-Buchenwald* concentration camp.

"It was a windy that morning, and two SS were watching my group. We were milling around in the yard, not allowed to speak to one another. I was studying the situation constantly, waiting for my moment."

He looks at me with a very serious intense expression, as if wanting to imprint something important into my head. "There is always 'a moment,' Vivi," he says. "It can last seconds or minutes or longer. When that moment comes one can take a chance. Sometimes, it's the only chance one gets to save one's life. That day my moment came when the truck arrived to take us away. One SS officer leaned into the cab to talk to the driver, while the other one, who was watching us, turned his back against the wind to shield a cigarette he was lighting." Papa lights a fresh cigarette while steering with one hand. He inhales deeply and closes his eyes for a moment.

"Surrounding the yard and Jewish cemetery was a pretty high wall. I inched my way close to the wall. When my 'moment' came, I turned and quickly climbed

the wall, prepared to get shot in the back if I didn't make it. It's better to die while escaping, than Never mind. Luckily, I made it in one leap," he continues triumphantly, "and here I am."

"Oh, Papa, I can't believe how close you came to getting caught. You are very brave. I am so proud of you," I say. He hugs me, pulling me close. I can hear his heart beating right next to my ear.

"A breeze and a cigarette," he nods as if agreeing with himself. "They helped. I got away and have been hiding ever since. So, I hope you understand why I'm always in danger, as is everyone who is with me. I simply can't see you anymore or take you with me or tell you where I stay. The Gestapo would love to get their hands on me and wring my neck." He pats the bulge in his waist and says, "but I'll take someone with me; I won't go alone, he shakes his head. "They'll never take me alive again."

"I understand," I say, not really comprehending, but picturing smiling Gestapo men wringing poor Papa's neck. The car stops in front of a shop. I wait for him to hold the door open for me, after he first looks up and down the street. Being with him seems unreal. And now I heard that I almost lost him like I lost my Uncle Herbert. Because Papa escaped more than a year ago, I hope that the Gestapo have forgotten to look for him.

We climb three steps and enter a shop. It is crammed with sewing notions, ribbons, buttons and knitting yarn. I bump my elbow against a corner shelf, stuffed with zippers and black balls of wool, and I remember that I was here with Oma a couple of weeks ago when she needed sewing supplies. Oma and I had walked, but

Papa drove a long while to reach the store.

"Choose whatever you'd like to have" he says, with a wave of his hand. I look around with a buyer's interest. "Whatever you'd like to have," echoes through my head. I rub my eyes and spot a small, blue-beaded purse, hanging on a delicate chain. I love the embroidered pretty yellow flowers on the front. After considering a white wool scarf and gloves on a pretty mannequin, I am back in front of the bag. I can't use the hat or gloves for a long time I think to myself, but I can use the bag all year.

"I think that you'd like that little blue hand bag, wouldn't you?" Papa asks.

"Oh, yes, Papa, very much," I say. He reaches up, removes it from its hook and pays for it. I feel an urgency in his movements, as we return to the car. He lights another cigarette, and starts the motor. Then he fishes in his jacket pocket and hands me a "talisman" penny for good luck to put into my purse. After a short ride, I'm in front of our house again.

"Go up to Omi quickly," he says. "She worries about you. Remember that I love you very much my Puppilein."

I want to talk about Uncle Herbert some more, tell Papa how afraid I am for him and that I dream about him a lot.

He stops me by putting his finger over my mouth and says, "I know ... I'm careful... I don't want to get caught either. But we live in dangerous times, and anything can happen." He gives me a pack of cigarettes for Oma and I get out of the car. He kisses his fingertips and blows me a kiss as he drives away.

We come home from the shelter one Wednesday morning in the middle of August. Opa builds a fire in the kitchen stove for Oma, who wants nothing but a cup of coffee. She is slicing bread for our breakfast. We are out of sugar so there is no sweet sprinkling on my bread today. Opa likes *Schmaltz* (rendered fat) and salt on his bread. He brings the fat jar out of the ice chest.

"We have to get a bar from the ice man, when he next comes," says Opa.

"I'd like some ice chips," I say. The door bell rings. "I'll get it," I offer.

"No," says Opa firmly. "You stay in the kitchen." After a moment, he returns with Mutti whom I haven't seen since May, three months ago. She looks different to me. She is very thin and has no smile. Tears trickle out of her eyes. Oma places a clean handkerchief in her hands.

"Mutti, where have you been traveling? You've been gone too long," I ask with some irritation.

"Unfortunately, I've been in jail, Vivi. I was jailed in May," she says wearily. "Oma didn't want to scare you, so she told you a little white lie." She drops into her usual kitchen chair while I stand beside her and put my arm around her narrow shoulder. Her head is bent, and I stroke her hair, feeling mortified by my selfishness and wishing I could take my words back.

"I tried to visit you," Opa says. "They said no one was allowed to have contact with you. Oma went another time. She had some fresh clothing for you, but they turned her away. *Alexander Platz* is a very tough place."

"Tell me about it," Mutti says with a sigh. "The Gestapo interrogated me about Hans daily. It's a good thing I didn't know anything, because they were very

cruel to me. They have a way of getting information even when you don't know you're saying anything incriminating. They also asked about Rudi Löwenthal (my aunt Gerda's boy friend) a lot. I think that they're trying to round up all the people who are still on the loose." Oma pours her a cup of coffee with lots of milk and passes her a lit cigarette.

"They knew that I was with Herbert when they took him; that was another reason for questioning me, guess I can thank Friedman for that. The swine," she says and sips some coffee. The cup trembles, as if too heavy.

"The woman with whom I shared a cell died after the first month, but the Gestapo wouldn't remove the corpse for several days to punish me for not giving them any information," she recalls. Her voice is bitter, and her hand is pressed against her mouth, fist clenched as if forcing back the tears.

"They called me a *Juden Sau* (Jewish pig) and spit in my face," she continues, "I was not allowed to wipe off the spittle. As it dried, it pulled my skin. I'll never forget how disgusted I felt." She inhales cigarette smoke deeply, as if it is fresh air. "I always had to stand while I was interrogated. Many hours under Hitlers full-length portrait. It stared down into my face.

"I was humiliated and degraded ... called a whore... and a..., " she notices that I am listening and runs her hand across her upper arms. "I was handled scornfully. The guard always squeezed my arm extra hard when they returned me to my cell. I was kept in jail longer than any of the other women in nearby cells." I watch her get up and walk to the kitchen window. Her gray skirt is wrinkled and stained. With her back to the window she faces us. "I wasn't issued a pillow or blanket. The food

was rotten. The soup was made of rotten bones. There was an occasional piece of cheese, but even in prison I couldn't make myself eat smelly cheese. I traded it for bread," she says as she grips the sill. "The Gestapo accused me of committing *Rassenschande* (race contamination), one of their favorite accusations.

"What a relief to finally pour my heart out. I was afraid I'd never see you again," she cries deep sobs, as her face sinks into her hands.

"I've dreamed about a hot bath. Do you have enough coal for one?" she sighs with exhaustion, pushing a stray of blond curl out of her puffy eyes.

"Of course, my girl," Opa says. "I'll start the fire right away. We're very proud of you; just sorry that you had to suffer so much. *Gott sei dank das meine Grosse wieder bei mir is.* (Thank God, my eldest is back with me,) he says, stroking her cheek tenderly, as he passes behind her chair. She holds his hand to her cheek a minute longer before he leaves to start the bath fire.

"I'll use Gerda's robe and clothing. You can burn this stuff in the bath oven. It smells too much like prison for me to ever wear it again," she tells Oma, and lights a new cigarette.

"You need to eat meat and potatoes," Oma observes, looking at Mutti's trembling hand and bony wrist.

"I can't even think about rich food," Mutti says. "A good broth with a few potatoes is all my stomach can handle."

"I'll alter your clothes for you. Nothing will fit. Everything will hang on you. You look 15 pounds lighter, my poor girl. I'm so relieved that you're home. Come, Vivi, you can kiss Mutti. Don't be afraid to hug and kiss her. Just do it gently. She'd

love a kiss from you."

I am afraid to touch Mutti's frail body. The bluish-green bruises on her arm look swollen. I finally touch Mutti after her bath. She snuggles in my bed next to me. I kiss her good night and go to sleep in Oma's bed.

Several mornings later, I tip-toe into my room to visit Mutti. I had passed up a shopping trip with Oma to spend time with her. "I still love you know who, even though he's a bastard," she is telling Tante Gerda, who is sitting on the edge of my bed. "He draws me like a moth to a flame, and you know what happens to the moth. I wish I could hate him, but rational or not, it's Mia I blame," she says, clenching her fist.

As Mutti mentions that name, an image comes to my mind: I was standing on a bed, looking at myself in a mirror. Along with my reflection I see Papa whispering to a smiling black-haired lady. She has a pretty smile, and I like the soft, blue-and-white cushions on her bed. Papa took me to her house some time ago and introduced her as Mia.

I ask Mutti whom she still loves; but as always happens when there's a good conversation, she changes the subject. Mutti calls me her "shadow" and invites me to sit at the foot of the bed.

"Remember, Gerda, how it was for us when we were young?" Mutti asks.

"I certainly do," Tante Gerda replies. "No swimming. No bicycling. No roller skating, or ice skating, these were all all forbidden to us for fear we might hurt ourselves."

"Yes," Mutti agrees with a chuckle. "We always had to decline when we were invited out. It was so embarrassing."

"So, of course, your mother broke her leg twice, just standing on a soccer field, watching your father play," Tante Gerda laughs. She takes a nail file from Mutti's tray and files her nails. They're both talking to me, wanting my attention like I'm on their level. "This is great," I think.

"I didn't see it coming, and it hit the side of my ankle. You should have seen Opa's reaction," Mutti says, addressing me again. "You would have thought that I planned a broken leg, just to irritate him." She makes a grimace, and sips coffee. Tante Gerda is painting her finger nails red. The strong odor fills the room. "Would you please open the door? We need cross ventilation," Tante Gerda says, pointing with her brush.

"As the eldest, I wasn't allowed to do anything. This means no dates, no nothing," Mutti continues. "That's why I always got into trouble. I had to try everything forbidden. Gerda, you must admit, being the second made it easier for you." She looks at me and says pointedly. "She's more passive and diplomatic, so she enjoyed a lot more privileges." Mutti winks at me, as if I'm her co-conspirator. I am relieved she's not crying today.

"I wasn't passive," Tante Gerda says. "I was just not as confrontational as you. You always had to rub their nose^s in stuff. But even I didn't have the freedom that you have, Vivi. I can't believe that Opa lets you bounce a ball in the apartment hallway while he naps. We weren't allowed to even leave our room while he snoozed."

At lunch time I unfold a wooden, folding chair for myself and catch my fingertip in the metal spring. I shriek in pain. Everybody looks at me with shock; they don't know why I am screaming. Searing pain shoots through me. Finally Oma understands. She opens the chair, unlocking my clipped finger tip. I am afraid to look, afraid my finger is gone. Bright red blood drips onto the gray linoleum floor as she wraps a big white handkerchief around my hand and tells me to hold it upright.

Dazed, Oma and Mutti guide me to a walk-in clinic many blocks away. Mutti reminds me to keep breathing. "Take a deep breath," she says every few minutes. Oma points to the red splotches that mark the street behind us, remarking that I am leaving a trail just like the fairy tale, Hansel and Gretel, who were lost in the woods. I respond with a weepy smile at her attempt to make me feel better.

A friendly nurse with squeaky shoes leads me down a corridor into the examining room. My blood drips on the checkered linoleum. I look across at the white walls, white cabinet and white stool with chrome legs. The nurse tells me to sit on the stool, as she fills water into a small white dish and soaks my finger. The water turns red, and my finger feels numb. She examines the pale finger tip.

"It doesn't look good," she says, looking into my eyes as if I might disagree. "The nail has to be pulled off. Otherwise you can get an infection; and the nail might never grow back." She waves her hand at the cabinet behind her.

"Unfortunately, we have no anesthesia available. All medicine is reserved for the war." My eyes follow the movement of her lips. I don't even know what anesthesia is, but before I can ask, a flicker of silver colored pliers pull my nail off. A flash of pain shoots through me from my finger straight into my scalp. I am too shocked to react or cry. I'd like to cradle my poor finger and not have it touched again, but the nurse supports my finger with a wooden stick and a thick white gauze bandage is wrapped all over my hand. Finally, she places her hand on my shoulder and returns me to my Mutti and Oma, who are standing in a room with white chairs, all lined up along the walls.

"This little girl is very brave," the nurse reports. "She didn't even scream. I don't know if I could have done as well. *"Du bist so tapfer wie ein Soldat an der front."* ("You are as brave as a soldier at the front,") she says, kneeling down to my level and stroking my cheek. Then, she ties a shiny red ribbon around my middle finger and says, "Hold your hand above your head when you next go to the shelter. I'm certain that your finger will be painful for a while."

On the walk home, I point to my red blood droppings on the sidewalk. Biting my cheeks, helps me to not cry. I don't want to upset Mutti anymore, today.

At night, I feel very important as I walk down the concrete tunnel into the large shelter hall. I hold my red-ribboned, throbbing hand up high, hoping I will be asked about my injury. The ribbon becomes unnecessary as the whole bandage is bright red. No one notices me; as people jostle for position to get a cot or reserve seats for other members of their group. Mutti carries a pillow for me. As I fall asleep,

Oma tells me an extra long story about a very brave princess, who injures herself. I cling to my doll, and wonder when I can tell Papa about my finger. I wish he were here to call me his *Puppilein*.

I walk down a long narrow corridor towards a door. I am trapped. I can't turn back. Large black dogs with pointed white teeth snap at my skirt. The door opens easily, I enter the room which is vacant except for the cloth-covered table and single chair. I hear a chair scrape loudly. It scratches the floor, making my neck feel prickly. It gives me goose bumps. I think Papa is hiding under the table. I try to raise the cloth but can't; my hand is too heavy to lift. Horse hooves pound. I hear them, louder, closer...My hair is touched, which startles me. I jump upright.

"You had a nightmare again," Oma says, smoothing my hair out of my eyes. "I heard you call Papa. Everything is all right.... Why don't you go and find your friend Lotte. She is in the shelter somewhere. Go show her your finger."

CHAPTER SIX

NEXT STOP IS AUSCHWITZ

"Try to drop your upper lip more," Mutti's red lips say. Her *Mai Glöckchen* scent (lily of the valley) fills the air. "You've got to improve the smile without showing your teeth." Tante Gerda grimaces into the hand mirror. A bowl of loose pearls, small scissors and her manicure set is spread out on the kitchen table. Tante Gerda is too afraid to visit a dentist to replace her broken front tooth. It broke in January 1943 around the time Papa was captured by the Gestapo during a massive seizure of Berlin Jews.

After his escape, an intensive search was conducted. Mutti and her sister were arrested while at work, and jailed the very next day, on the 12th of January, which was also Mutti's birthday. During their incarceration, Mutti and Tante Gerda were repeatedly interrogated. Their versions were cross examined to find an inconsistency in the information they provided, or failed to provide. The Gestapo wanted clues regarding the whereabouts of Papa. "Who is hiding and assisting him?" they kept asking. The Gestapo knew he was helped by someone. It is hard to vanish without help. Tante Gerda was also questioned about Rudi Löwenthal her sweetheart. He, still, lives underground and has evaded capture so far, but finding

Papa was the interrogator's main focus. Mutti and Tante Gerda's answers were not productive. This irritated their captors, and as punishment, Mutti and Tante Gerda were fed only stale bread and water. Tante Gerda broke off her front tooth gnawing on a chunk of hard bread. Ten days later, they were abruptly released.

Papa was not found by the Gestapo.

Since then, Tante Gerda has fashioned pearls that blend in with her teeth and almost fit over the tooth stump. She is too afraid to visit a dentist for proper care.

"I think with a little more filing it will work," Mutti says. "You'd better make many replacements because your pearls don't last very long. I have a feeling that pearls are not made for chewing," she says, chuckling.

"I can make a necklace for my doll if you can spare a pearl," I say, fascinated by the feminine interchange. Tante Gerda gives me a pearl, and I immediately start my new project. The next day Mutti returns to her apartment. I feel lonely and complain to Oma that our apartment is empty and smells of cabbage.

Three nights later, we are released from another stay in the bomb shelter. It is raining hard; water is trickling down my nose. Although I am cold, it feels refreshing. I take a deep breath and stick my tongue out, trying to capture droplets in my mouth.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Nine o'clock," Opa says, "your bedtime. Our water caskets should be full today."

Tante Gerda is carrying our suitcase home. She sounds worried as she talks to Oma. "I know that something serious has happened to Rudi. I can feel it," she says. "I've never been this long without word from him. I talked to him on the first of November, 11 days ago. I fear the worst. I am really afraid this time. You know that Jews, once arrested, are never released." She cries and grabs Oma's hand.

The walk is long. We pass many house shells. I believe that ghosts are digging through the house ruins, scratching the soil as they search for their bodies. Neatly arranged stacks of used brick have replaced blocks of homes. Large mountains of rubble are swept against any remaining walls. Chalk messages written on a wall are washing away, leaving a pattern of dripping color. The rain creates deep canyons and looks spooky. Water has filled a crater, like a large looking glass that mirrors moonlight. The sidewalk is marked with pot holes, which the moon highlights. I am certain the moon follows me all the way home.

While I prepare for bed, I hear a special knock at our door. Tap,tap. - Tap tap. - Tap. Tante Gerda rushes to open the door, and I am right behind her. A drenched, pitiful Rudi stumbles in. His wet hair is plastered to his head, and his tall body looks emaciated. I am afraid of the sight. A tiny muscle twitches beneath his left eye. There is a jagged cut above his right swollen temple. His voice doesn't sound like Rudi's at all. It is hoarse and very solemn. He is almost whispering as I hide behind Oma's dress.

"I got away, I did it. I can't believe I did it," he exclaims, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "Oh, what an ordeal. I thought I'd never see any of you again." He holds on to the kitchen door and closes his eyes.

"What happened, Rudichen, I've been so worried, my dear," says Tante Gerda. She takes his bony hand and kisses it.

"First he has to get dry," says Oma, scampering to find a towel so Rudi can dry his head. She asked me to get a wool sweater from the white closet in the corridor.

"Here is an old sweater from Opa," she says. "Put it on quickly after you take that wet thing off. Drink this cup of hot tea. I know you don't like it sweet, but tonight you need the sugar. Opa, don't you have a bottle of Schnapps somewhere? Rudi needs a shot in his tea." She pulls out a kitchen chair for him, and he settles down across from Tante Gerda.

Opa produces half a bottle of light brown liquid and fills four short glasses. Rudi drinks his in one gulp. "I think we all need a shot of schnaps, tonight," says Opa. "Go ahead and have another one, my boy. Vivi, you can have a little sip from my glass; it will help you sleep better." He pours a generous refill in Rudi's tea cup. I take a tiny sip and shudder at the sharp tingling on my tongue. Watching one another over the edge of their cups, Opa, Oma, Tante Gerda and Rudi silently drink tea.

"I've been in hell," he says and drops his face on his arms. He remains motionless, resting on the kitchen table. Suddenly, he shudders and wipes his eyes with both hands, jumps up and crosses over to the kitchen sink. "I have to wash my hands and face, I'd like to scour myself with rubbing alcohol, anything to feel clean again." Face damp, he returns to his seat and hugs his shoulders. "It was around the second of November," Rudi begins. "I went to Kurt's house to pick up my new set of false identification papers, but it was not my lucky day. No... it certainly wasn't.

Before I go on, I need a piece of bread. This alcohol is zooming right to my head. Plain is fine," he tells Oma. "I'll dip it in my tea."

Tante Gerda is mesmerized. She just stares at Rudi's face, as if imprinting it forever. She takes his hand, rubbing it with her own, to give him life and vitality. Oma cuts Rudi a thick slice of dark bread. He breaks it into small pieces and slowly chews.

"I had contact with Kurt in the middle of September. I followed the usual procedure of walking slowly past his house waiting for him to come out. He passed by me and muttered, 'Go into the park and sit down on the first bench on the right.' Coming from different directions, we reached the bench at the same time. I had placed my written order and cash deposit into a folded newspaper on the bench next to me." Rudi closes his eyes tightly, and takes a deep breath. I watch his face muscle tremble. Only the kitchen clock hands move. Tante Gerda breaks the quiet spell and gets up. She wets a towel and tells Rudi to please hold it over his puffy temple.

"Two weeks later, on November second, I went to pick up my papers," Rudi says. "A man with his hands in his coat pocket was standing in front of Kurt's apartment house, not looking at me; but I got a funny feeling in my stomach that he was watching me. So I passed the front door as if I were just casually walking down the street. However, the man stepped forward, blocking my path. He said 'Halt.' Show me your papers.' I fumbled in my pocket and said, 'I must have forgotten them.' He pulled out a revolver, pointed it right into my stomach, and said; 'You're under arrest. Don't bother to lie. We've already got Kurt, and you're Rudi Löwenthal. With or without papers we know who you are.' "

Tante Gerda, clasps her hand over her mouth, and grabs Rudi's arm, while he sips hot tea and dips bread into his tea cup. Then he goes on: "I was driven to the *Alexander Platz* police station, where Elli was held the last time. Then the real trouble began.... Ahh... I was interrogated about who else buys false papers from Kurt, who else sells false papers and where I've been sleeping and hiding and who gives me money to live on. The SS asked questions upon questions. They had already arrested several other men; some I knew, some I didn't. Apparently, the Gestapo had been keeping Kurt's place under surveillance for some time. They knew that Jews living underground, eventually would need forged Identification papers and would come to Kurt's house, sooner or later."

Rudi gets up, drops the towel in the sink, and rubs the twitching muscle on his face. He leans his back against the stove to face us as he says, "They tortured me every day. They hung me by my hands and feet, trussed like a package." Hearing this makes Tante Gerda hide her face in her hands. Oma lights a cigarette and, with trembling fingers, sips some water from a glass.

"First they'd ask me the same daily questions." "Where have you been hiding? Where are your friends? Where is Hans Ert? Who else has prepared false papers for you?" All my answers were evasive, of course, and so they'd get impatient with me.

" 'We know that you can't survive this long without help from others,' they would yell. We want to know who they are. You will tell us; we have ways of finding out,' was my daily threat.

"What did you think about while you were questioned Rudichen?" asks Tante Gerda.

"I concentrated on you Gerda, thinking about you, picturing your pretty face," Rudi answers, looking at her with a half smile. "It helped my mind rise above those Nazi pigs." Tante Gerda smiles at him forgetting to drop her upper lip. She still looks pretty to me.

"When they didn't like my answer or lack of an answer,— I gave no one away,— they tied up my hands and hung me on a ceiling pipe till I thought my shoulders would come out of the socket." He rubs his shoulder as Oma pours more tea and strokes his receding, wheat-colored hair.

"One bastard regularly tied me to a chair and placed it in front of an open window," says Rudi "and poured a bucket of cold water over me. The bastard's words were always the same." 'The November air should clear your head for the next session.' After I don't know how many hours, they'd throw me back in a cell with the parting words; 'Next stop is Auschwitz, Löwenthal.'

"Early this morning the loudspeaker announced that volunteers were needed for duty. I volunteered, and I was given a suitcase-carrying detail. Victims who had been sent to concentration camps left their suitcases in a hall, and these were to be transferred. My job was to carry the suitcases to a basement room. While doing so, I saw a small open window at the end of a corridor and said to myself. 'It's now or never. I won't get many chances, so there's nothing to lose. I'll be killed one way or another, so I quickly lifted myself up the window sill, climbed out of the small window and leaped to the nearest sturdy tree branch. Luckily, it held my weight. I climbed the tree to the top, and jumped onto the roof of the building. All this happened within a few minutes. Then I ran across the roofs of several houses and

finally came down from one. I hid until it got dark, which luckily happens early in November. Then I walked here, hiding in ruins of houses if I saw people on the street. Because there was an air raid, the streets were deserted. I'm glad that it didn't snow. I had enough trouble with my footing on the roofs." He starts to pace nervously in our kitchen, as if it's too small, and rubs the twitching muscle.

Tante Gerda says, "Sit down *Schatz*, (treasure) I'll massage your shoulders. I have to touch you somehow. It's all so unreal. Ach, Rudi ... you've been so brave I'm so grateful to have you back," she sighs, playing her fingers over his neck and shoulders.

"We don't dare keep you here, but you probably have nowhere else to go," Oma says, looking at Opa for advice.

He tips his chair back, strokes his chin, and says, " Let me work out an idea I have."

He goes to the hall closet and returns with a warm dark jacket and a knit cap.

"Your pants are dirty, anyway; so black, coal soot won't hurt them," he says. "We'll take a blanket and go downstairs to our coal cellar. This time of night we won't run into anyone. Gerda, fix him something else to eat and pour tea into a thermos. Let's go, its not safe for you to be here any longer." Opa picks up the coal bucket, and with his big, black flashlight, leads the way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BE QUIET AND DON'T MOVE

It's late in the afternoon on the third Wednesday in November, 1944. I'm on the street playing hopscotch with Lotte and Astrid Bauer. Lotte's blond braids bounce over her shoulder as she bends down to pick up her green throwing pebble. Astrid is playing catch with her red one, and now it's my turn to toss my yellow stone into one of the chalk squares. I hop on one leg into my square. As I turn for home plate, I catch sight of Papa.

My heart thunders in my chest, and my cheeks burn like a flame. I know my face is red because I can feel the hot flush rising up from my toes. It has been three months since I last saw Papa. He stands in the shadow leaning against a house wall at the corner. He is watching me with a cigarette in his mouth. His coat collar is turned up. He's wearing high black boots. We make eye contact. He winks with a slight smile, but at the same time, he raises one hand in a motion that I interpret as a signal to stay where I am. Unsure, I stop myself from running across the street to

hug him. My eyes are glued on Papa. The game drags on.

Peek a boo. Maybe he's playing with me. I wonder what I should do. I am torn. My instinct says run across. And yet... he did hold up his hand. His words, "We live in dangerous times," rings in my head. As I land at home plate, I've convinced myself that he does want me to come. Why else would he be here? I pick up my yellow pebble and look across the street.

He's gone.

Oh, Papa. I blink hard to clear my eyes. My mind is racing about, trying to understand. Maybe I imagined everything. Was I daydreaming again? I cross the street to where I thought I saw him stand, and stare at the wall once more. If only Papa were still standing here. We could have one of our little talks again. Perhaps if I close my eyes and wish real hard.... Something white is on the ground. I pick up a smoked cigarette butt. It's still warm. I sniff it. Does it smell like him? I kiss the mouthpiece and cup it in my hand to protect it. I, too, lean against the wall. With eyes closed, I'd like to sink into the stones and feel him. Lotte calls to me, but I wave good bye, and run upstairs to my grandparents.

"I saw Papa, but he didn't talk to me," I report.

"You're sure you saw him?" Opa raises his head, shoving the newspaper aside.

"Yes, I am positive," I say, and take the cigarette stub out of my pocket.

"That is odd," he says, frowns and resumes reading. Tante Gerda lights the stove with rolled newspapers. She turns on the water to cook potatoes and then salts them. I replace the stub in my pocket and set the table, while Oma prepares thick pea

soup and sliced *Schwarzbrot* (black bread) for our evening meal. "How is Rudi?"

Opa asks Tante Gerda.

"He feels like a walnut living in a nutshell, and ... "

An angry pounding on the door booms through the kitchen.

Startled, my spoons clatter to the floor.

Opa looks up from the newspaper, and mutters, "Ja, Ja, coming."

A towering, heavy set man in a gray Gestapo uniform with high black boots, comes into the kitchen. He scowls at me with pale watery eyes.

"Are you Hans Ert's daughter?" he asks in a gruff voice.

"Yes she is," Oma answers.

"Everyone here, produce your papers," he orders, as he takes wire-rimmed glasses out of his breast pocket and settles them on his nose. He squints at Tante Gerda's papers a long time.

"I want to talk to her alone" he says as he comes up to me. He stands there, motionless. Looking down at me, he seems to grow taller. He motions me to follow him and turns around. Slowly, with his hands behind his back he walks down our corridor into my grandparent's dimly lit bedroom. What does he want from me? What am I **expected** to confess to? My heart feels like it is in my throat, overcome by a sense of having to be careful. Extremely careful.

He sits down on Oma's bed and signals me to stand between his legs. I don't want to look into his eyes and keep mine lowered, staring at his shiny black boots. Leaning his bulky torso toward me, he lifts my chin, forcing me to look into his moist eyes.

"So when was the last time you saw your father?" he asks.

I look down at my hands, as they fidget with the hem of my dress and say nothing. His breath hangs in the air between us, like a bridge inviting me to cross over.

"Have you seen father this week, *Liebchen*?" (Sweetie) he coos. "Who are his friends? A smart girl like you would surely remember."

His mouth smiles at me with crooked teeth; his eyes are stern. I don't think he likes me although he's pretending that he does. I don't like him either because I am afraid of him.

"Speak up, I won't bite you," he commands.

"I haven't seen him for a long time. I don't know where he is," I answer softly.

He leans over, exposing the fat rolls on his neck. He pinches my cheek, forcing my face up again. A thin line of sweat is on his upper lip, and there is a puffiness in his cheeks.

"Maybe, I'll take you for a ride in my car. Maybe you'll remember where his friends live, hm?" he says.

His huge shadow looms across the wall to my right. I'd rather stare at the flowers on the wallpaper, but I must face him.

"I don't know any friends," I whisper. I wipe the image of my pleated skirt sitting in the big fry pan at Paul Schmidt's restaurant from my mind. "Think of nothing," I tell myself, and keep staring at his boots. I feel myself shrink, wishing I could turn to the size of a mouse and run away and hide.

Impatiently, he slaps his thigh. I flinch as he pushes me away and storms out of the room.

"We are not finished yet," he shouts at Oma, in the hall.

I rub the cheek he pinched till it stings, and follow the clicking footsteps.

"No one can hide from the Gestapo for long." Uncle Herbert's words ring in my ear. Poor Papa.

"You are under arrest, come with me for questioning," he snaps at Tante Gerda in the kitchen.

She bursts into tears. "Officer," she says. "I haven't done anything. Why am I being arrested?"

"Do you know a Rudi Löwenthal?" he asks.

"Well, yes I do, but I haven't seen him for a very long time," she stammers.

"Get your coat, or don't get it. We are leaving, *Heil Hitler*," he thunders.

Tante Gerda accepts the coat Oma wraps around her. The Gestapo officer's neck bulges above the stiff collar of his uniform when he turns.

Tante Gerda follows him out of our kitchen.

The door slams shut. The apartment is suddenly silent.

We stare vacantly at each other with the same thought. If the Gestapo knew about Uncle Rudi in the coal cellar, we'd all be arrested right now. At breakfast this morning, Opa returned to the cellar. He brought Rudi another blanket and a full food pail. He also exchanged his bathroom bucket for a fresh one. He told us he again relocated boxes and shoveled coal into one corner, to make more room for Rudi between the coal and the wood bin.

Is Rudi lonely down there? I wonder. I think of him when I'm in my bed at night, how cold and lonely he must feel. I wonder if mice visit him and the thought makes me shudder. I haven't been allowed to see him, even when we were in the cellar for a bomb attack. Tante Gerda occasionally sneaks into his "nutshell" as he calls it, but that's rare because she doesn't want to arouse suspicion.

"He's all right," Opa says, "anything is better than the hell he came from. But remember," he cautions, looking at me seriously, "you are to forget about him. Never mention his name, even when we are home alone. Promise?"

"I promise," I say. I picture mice nibbling at his fingers while he's sleeping.

Opa returns to his chair and grips the back. "I have to sit down or fall down. My old legs won't hold me," he says. "Vivilein come here." Opa pulls me close, burying my face in his worn, Opa-smelling sweater.

"Things go from bad to worse," says Oma, as she pulls her chair to the table. She swallows hard and clenches her fingers around the cold cup of coffee.

"What will they do to Gerda? She's not as strong as Elli, I hope she doesn't break down. If she talks about Rudi, we'll all be dead," she says.

"Gerda knows. She'll be as strong as she has to be. I have confidence in her love for Rudi and that will give her strength," answers Opa.

Oma turns to me. "I was listening in the corridor," she says and *Du hast nichts verraten*. (you gave nothing away.) You were very good. Your Papa will be proud of you."

"I protected Papa?," I ask. Hearing that makes me smile and feel a little better.

Opa tips his chair back and says, "Ja, you were fine, but something has

definitely happened with Hans. We just don't know what." He wipes his brow and twists his handkerchief into a ball.

A little later, Oma fills three plates for dinner. When the telephone rings, we all jump. Mutti's co-worker tells Opa that Mutti was arrested at her job. She is in jail. Now Mutti and Tante Gerda are both in the *Grosse Hamburger*.

"I wish I knew what's going on. Elli has been divorced for three years. What makes them think she knows anything, and what do they want from Gerda?" Opa muses, angrily cutting potatoes which don't need cutting. Oma mashes food on her plate, but eats very little. Splotches of red cover her cheeks.

"I have no idea what's going on with Hans. Maybe they want to lure him out of hiding by using her as bait," she says, nodding in my direction.

I wonder what the word "bait" means.

"At least I have the satisfaction of knowing he's still on the loose but with two daughters in jail and my six-year-old grandchild being interrogated, there's little satisfaction in anything," Oma says. She pushes her plate away and lights a cigarette.

"We have to do something to protect her," says Opa.

Hearing that I need protection is scary. I remember how two silent men took Uncle Herbert away from Mutti and me. We couldn't protect him. Is that how the Gestapo will take me? Poor Mutti. This is the third time that she is in jail. I hope they won't hit her. I wonder if mice are in the jail with her.

"It's way past your bedtime," says Oma. "You can curl your toes around this warm bottle I prepared. Tonight you will sleep with us in the big bed."

I hear them whisper a long time as I fall asleep.

I dream of tall uniformed men, looking straight through me. They can see my thoughts. Papa and Uncle Herbert are smiling at me, while the uniformed men with the help of gray, pointy -nosed mice are pulling me away. They are forcing me to go with them. Mutti is waiting for me, they say. I jump up and moan out loud.

Oma sits up next to me and strokes my back. My throat feels too dry to swallow.

"It's all right," she says. Everything is all right. I'm here. Go back to sleep."

When I get up in the morning, I see Oma in the living room. A breeze is playing with the white window curtains. Her arms are resting on the ledge.

"What are you looking at?" I ask.

"Nothing special. Opa and I are taking turns watching the street. We live in dangerous times, you know."

I stand next to her at the window and also look out. A man is sitting on the high seat of a horse buggy with a young boy next to him. He is urging the horse to make a right turn. I would love to ride in a buggy.

"No, no, I don't want you here wearing only a nightgown," says Oma. "Go to the kitchen to Opa."

A high-pitched voice shouts, "Sieg Heil. Sieg Heil. " A mass of voices join in, "Sieg Heil. Sieg Heil. Sieg Heil."

"Crazy people," Opa says and shuts off the radio. "Ready for breakfast?"

"Yes, I'm starved," I say.

Minutes later, Oma is calling from the living room: "They are coming. Get Vivi into the closet."

Opa grabs my hand and rushes me to our tall, white coat closet in the foyer. Clothing, normally stored on the bottom of the closet, has been piled on the floor next to it. He opens the door and helps me to climb in and pushes me down flat on the bottom of the closet.

"Bitte, bitte bewege Dich nicht. Sei ganz still. Es ist sehr gefährlich." (Please, please don't move. Be very quiet)," he pleads. *"(It is very dangerous.)"* He covers me with layers of old clothing. I hold my breath and barely turn my head to the side. The door squeaks shut.

The door bell rings.

"We are here for Hans Ert's daughter, Rea Chana, also known as Vivian," they announce.

"She's not here," I hear grandmother say.

"Oh really! We'll look around just the same," they say. Clicking boots pass my hiding place. I am terrified. Now they'll find me and take me away like Uncle Herbert. Nobody can save me if the Nazis want me. I'll be swallowed up like all the others – grandparents Ert, Hanni, Herbert. Maybe I'll be in jail with Mutti and Tante Gerda. The clothing over my mouth smothers me. It is hard to breathe, and I push my lips out to form a tunnel with my mouth.

I don't dare move. My eyes are covered with a sweater, which scratches when I blink. I squeeze them shut. My arms are stretched out flat. The closet is the width of my body. My feet are pressing against a closet wall. I'm afraid to breathe.

Click, click. Footsteps are getting louder, pause.... Click click click.

The closet door squeaks open. Through the thick layer of clothing, I feel two hands pressing on my stomach. My world stands still, and I hold my breath. I am suffocating but don't care.

"Please don't find me," I mentally beg. A burning flush covers me, but my body feels numb. Hands are sifting cloth above me. I picture the dreaded Gestapo man from yesterday: pale, watery eyes, leaning over me. Only old clothing separates our breath. The door squeaks, as it is slammed shut. Angry voices shout, "*Heil Hitler.*"

The door groans again, clothing is torn off my face. I breathe in deeply at last, feeling dizzy. Oma helps me struggle out of the closet and into the light of the kitchen. I was sweating so much that my nightgown is stuck to my skin. I close my eyes with relief that they didn't get me. I'm still alive and at home.

"You were very good, Vivi," says Oma as she holds a glass of water to my mouth while I sip. "Very good indeed."

"Will they come back?" I ask Opa, feeling terrified and weak.

Opa paces the kitchen from window to stove. He is bent over, clenching his fist and muttering, "This can't go on; they'll find her the next time." He rubs his chin. "This can't go on. What to do? What can we do?"

"The Gestapo searched the apartment thoroughly, but we can't count on them not to find her next time. They won't give up," Oma says. She pulls a chair to the kitchen table and sits down. "They looked behind the blackout drapes, under all the beds, in the armoire and in the kitchen pantry. What can we do? She can't live

in the coal cellar with Rudi. Who do we know?" She looks at Opa for a solution.

He stares into space as if to find an answer floating in the air. He walks back toward the window. His hands are behind his back. He stands, rocking on his feet and peering out of the window.

"I might have an idea," he says, turning towards her. "I'll be right back."

He leaves the room, and Oma's eyes follow him. Opa returns, carrying the area rug from their bedside.

"Oma, get a bag together for Vivi. Stuff it full of clothes for a couple of weeks. Be sure to include her doll and some *Puppen Lappen*," he tells her.

"Vivilein, hold on to your nightgown sleeves and slip on your coat. Your socks and boots are next.... Now come here and lie down on this rug" says Opa, as he spreads out the small area rug. "Put your head here, near the fringe. I'm going to carry you to our friends house."

"By hiding in the rug, no neighbors can report anything if they are questioned," Oma says. She kisses my forehead before Opa rolls me over and over just like Oma rolls dough to make noodles for soup.

"Emil, you are brilliant," she tells him. "Can they be trusted?"

"As far as I know, the Schultz family can be trusted. Besides, we don't have many choices," he tells her. Addressing me, he says, "They have older children Vivi, do you remember Erika and Lene? They gave you pretty buttons for you doll dresses. You'll stay with them for a while until things quiet down here," he calmly reassures me.

"I wonder what's going on with Hans this time," he says to Oma, as they walk

out of the apartment carrying me. I wish I could stay home. I am rolled like a sausage. I don't like the rug in my face; it smells of shoe polish. Yesterday the mean Gestapo officer was standing on this rug. I'm very afraid of him. I hope he can't find me at the Schultz's house.

"Bizarre," Oma says. "Really bizarre. Vivi says she saw him. I hope he's hiding out someplace safe." I am lost in my thoughts: will they have room in their cellar for me? Is the house strong? I can see the sky; the bare tree tops filter through the long fringes. When I open my mouth, the fringes fall in.

"No place is safe for Hans in this city," says Opa. "But tell me how you knew the Gestapo was coming?"

"Well, I noticed a black car cruising past our house. Then it made a U-turn at the corner and it stopped across the street. As soon as two men stepped out, wearing the same black, leather coats and hats, it didn't take a genius to figure it out. I thought, if it's a false alarm, we'll use it as a practice drill.... But I thought my head would explode from the tension," says Oma. I hear her take a deep breath. "The cold air feels good. I hope we saved her this time."

Opa shifts me to his other shoulder. He is breathing through his nose, making snorting sounds. Can they save me? I wonder. My teeth knock together, chattering, even though the rug feels hot. I don't want to go. I feel safe with my grandparents, and they need me, too. Opa always tells Mutti that they need me when she threatens to take me back. Now she is in jail. Poor Mutti. Opa is walking uphill; I hear the effort.

I can picture the Schultz family. A big jar of buttons is in front of them on the

round brown table. They are sewing matching button sets on gray cardboard squares. Maybe I can help them. I don't remember them very well. I hope they'll like me.

I am sorry that Opa has to carry me. I would like to walk, but he has forbidden me to speak until he lets me know. I wonder if Papa will know where I am. I worry that no place is safe for him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JEWS AND DOGS NOT WELCOME

Huge black, slick, slippery door. My hand slides off the slimy handle. Light flickers overhead. I must reach him. I have to protect him. What is supposed to be a shout won't leave my mouth. My scream is stuck in my throat. I am hitting the door and something soft meets me. I bolt up. Goose bumps cover my neck and arms. My heart beats wildly.

Frau Schultz is leaning towards me, talking to me. Her soft voice is calm and constant. Her hand strokes mine.

"You had a bad dream," she says. "Everybody gets them. Don't worry. Stay in bed a few minutes more." Smoothing her dry red hands over her yellow flowered apron, she gets up from the edge of my bed. In profile, her big tummy and upswept hairdo create a sort of balancing contrast which fascinates me. My daydreams are more satisfying, I decide. Like being the beautiful strong princess who saves her handsome prince from the evil gray dragon with black feet.

"Will you read me a story about the stork bringing your baby?" I ask.

"Maybe a little later in the day," she answers. "First I have many buttons to sew on cards; the store wants a full box by Wednesday Are you hungry?" She turns at the door to ask. "There is a slice of bread for you in the kitchen. What kind of spread would you like?"

"*Pflaumen Marmelade*," (plum marmalade) I answer. I love sweets, and, particularly, her homemade plum jam.

"I'll help you sort buttons as soon as I am dressed," I offer. It's fun to dig in the large button jar and find matches. Fragile mother-of-pearl, brown wood with tiny painted flowers, leather, and fabric-covered circles are my favorites. But, mainly, we match boring black and brown buttons of the same size. It's very cozy, though, when the whole family works together, telling stories about books they are reading. This makes me wish I could read better.

When the air raid siren howls a few hours later, things change. The sound is like an ominous song. The Schultz's have practiced their shelter drill. Everybody has a duty. My job is to gather my coat, my doll, my blanket and hold Frau Schultz's hand. She carries her knitting bag in the other hand. Her husband, Franz, proud of his heavy, drooping black mustache, makes sure all candles and kerosene lamps are out, and then hauls the big suitcase. Erika and Lene each have a small valise, plus a food package and bottles of boiled water, in case we're in the cellar a long time. We must use their cellar because Frau Schultz can't walk fast enough to reach a shelter.

Neighbors greet Frau Schultz and make room at the black metal bannister for her. She hands me her knitting bag, which I proudly carry. Their cellar is smaller

than ours at home. The single overhead bulb casts spooky shadows on the wall. No windows. No clock. Time doesn't matter once the door closes. Worn benches pushed against the wall seat everyone. Erika puts a small pillow on the bench for her mother; she sits down with a sigh. At least we all sit together. I push against Lene to give her mother elbow room to knit. We are sitting much closer to each other than we would if there were a choice, and too many unbathed body odors mingle. The first room on the right has bins marked with the occupant's name. The bins are filled with coal; the Schultz box is half-full. Rudi couldn't hide here, I think to myself. There is no place to conceal him in this cellar like we can at home. Erika and Lene are nice to me, but they won't play dolls with me; but Lene, who is 11, has offered to teach me to crochet a hat for my doll. She is unwinding a sweater that she has outgrown, and is giving me some yarn to use. It's gray – which is not my favorite color. I don't think she likes the color either, because it didn't look too tight when she modeled it for her mother. Thirteen-year-old Erika likes to practice gymnastics. She is teaching me a back bend and leg split.

"Will Oma come to visit me soon?" I whisper. I am so lonely for my grandparents. Talking about them helps; it makes them seem closer, somehow. I probably ask about them daily.

Frau Schultz is knitting a baby blanket. She is using the gray wool Lene is unwinding. "I think they'll come soon," she says. "With so many air raids, it's hard for them to come; they have a very long walk." This is her daily answer. She smiles at me, and I have to smile back. It would be rude not to.

In the distance I hear the rumble of airplanes, coming closer. The noise is

heading straight to us. "Please go to the right or the left," I mentally beg. The roar, is almost overhead.

"They're flying low today; cover your ears girls," Franz shouts, just as the first blast slices into a target. Fear brings both my hands to my mouth. I bite into my thumb.... Relief.... That one didn't hit us. I've never seen a bomb -- only the huge craters they cause. I imagine that a bomb is as large as a car, heavy as steel, being dropped from the sky. The thunder grows. Each plane carries the load that might bury us. I miss my Oma. I cringe under Frau Schultz's arm for the remainder of the hours, so close that her body scent -- sweat and talcum powder -- is in my nostrils. I think about Mutti and Papa, Rudi and my grandparents. I picture our cellar. Oma is probably mending Ali's socks. Oma told me that he gets holes often because his feet are growing.

The next day is Saturday. In the evening, we follow a weekly ritual. It begins with a large tub that is placed on the kitchen table and filled with hot water. The dim kerosene flame silhouettes pretty shadows on the wall of the girls and me. We amuse each other by making funny creatures with our hands.

"Look at the dancing shadows," Lene says, as she climbs in. She is trying to distract me because she knows I don't like hot water. Before she scrubs her face she uses her washcloth to make odd animals, moving trees and wavy mountains. While she dries herself, Erika climbs in with a loud plop. Finally I squat in the lukewarm water bowl and wash. I am careful to soap in and behind my ears the way Oma has taught me.

When I am standing on the table drying myself, Oma and Opa appear in the doorway. I didn't hear them knock. Apparently, Lene let them in. Wrapped in a big white towel, I rush to them and hug Oma, who kneels and kisses my nose. The collar of her gray coat is made of curly gray fur, which tickles my face when she embraces me. "Slip into your pajamas and robe before you get sick," she tells me. Feeling warm, damp and happy, I do.

"What a night. The snow is soft, but thick," she gestures with her hands. "There are great big flakes and many of them. I felt like I was walking on goose feathers."

"The snow started after we were half way here, so we just kept walking," says Opa, as he removes his black, snow caked hat. They shake the snow off their coats and stamp their boots on the hall rug. Opa places a large package on the table.

"I brought a piece of meat and a salami -- horse meat of course -- and a bread," he says.

Oma smiles and beckons me with her finger. "Look what I made you," she says. I peek in the bag and spot *Phannkuchen*. (donuts.)

"Oh, how nice of you to bring so many good things. It isn't necessary, you know. Vivi is no trouble for us at all," Frau Schultz says, removing the brown paper wrapping from the package. "Franz, make some tea for us, please, and take the meat package and set it on the kitchen window ledge. We didn't get an ice delivery this week," she says, walking into the living room, "because it's so cold outside."

"Yes, yes. I do the same thing," says Oma, rubbing her hands together. "Our window ledge is my ice box, too."

Opa throws his arm around Herr Schultz's shoulder. Although there is a big age difference between them, their friendship stems from watch repair work. Herr Schultz apprenticed with Opa many years ago.

I climb onto Oma's lap and dangle my legs over the arm of the brown leather chair.

"Is Mutti home?" I ask.

"Tante Gerda was released on Tuesday morning, but they are still holding your mother. At least Gerda was with her in the same cell, and your mother is holding up well. She sends you hugs and kisses," Oma says, snuggling my cheek with her cold nose. "She'll be released soon, we hope."

"Are you taking me home tonight?" I wonder.

She shakes her head sadly.

"Have the Gestapo come again? Have you heard from Papa?" I continue.

Oma kisses my forehead and rubs my back with her fingers tips, the way I like, saying: "We haven't heard from your Papa. The Gestapo came twice more. I was home alone the second time. They searched the apartment, but I hope they won't come again. It was a different officer each time."

I lean against Oma, enjoying her nearness.

Opa and Herr Schultz bring in a tray filled with tea cups. The girls carry a large plate of donuts that Oma brought. Herr Schultz relights his pipe and draws deeply. "The times are getting worse," he says. "The driver who picks up our button boxes up told me that when I raise my arm, for my *Heil Hitler* greeting, I'm not vigorous enough. 'Too lackadaisical' he said. Can you imagine?"

"That sounds like Herr Keller in my building. He uses the greeting whenever he can, as a challenge. But I've got his number. My greeting is louder than his and he's never sure if I'm insulting him. *Idiot* (idiot), Opa mutters. "Little men with too much power can turn you in for any imagined insult... but you have to feed your growing family, Franz. You can't take any chances on being fired from your job -- especially, for not showing enough respect for him," Opa advises, raising his arm in a make believe Hitler greeting.

"The air raids come more frequently than ever," Oma says. "The house diagonally across the street from us took a bad hit. It's still livable, but many grenade holes had to be filled -- just like our living room last winter. Remember?" she asks me.

I nod my head and pull her arms tighter around me.

"Have neighbors asked you who Vivian is, and why she is with you?" Opa asks, checking his watch.

"Yes. I tell them that she's a friend's daughter who is staying with us for a while. I always change the subject quickly; you know how nosy people can be," says Frau Schultz, replacing her teacup in the saucer.

The girls and I giggle, comparing our powdered- sugar mustaches. Erika's reaches her nose.

Frau Schultz comments that it will be Christmas soon. "Hopefully, it's our last war Christmas," she adds, straightening the white linen tablecloth on the narrow rectangular table.

"When is the baby due?" Oma asks.

"The stork is expected around the middle of January," Frau Schultz answers, her hands resting protectively across the curve of her belly. I picture the white stork flying through thick snow to come to their house.

"The baby will catch a cold when the stork brings it," I observe. The books I've seen show babies wearing only a diaper, which the stork holds to carry the baby in his long red beak. I will watch Frau Schultz and catch sight of the stork when he delivers the baby. I wonder if he can fly into a cellar.

"Look at the hat I made with Lene's help, and I have to show you something else." I try a back bend, groaning as my fingertips reach the floor.

"Don't hurt yourself," Oma warns, getting up.

"I won't," I respond from my upside-down position.

"We'd better start back," Opa says. He picks me up, smooths my hair down and hugs me. I wrinkle my nose because I smell Schnapps on his breath. He and Herr Schultz must have had some in the kitchen.

"Soon we'll take you home; we just want to make sure it's safe," Oma says, hugging me close.

Whispering in her ear I ask if Rudi is still in the cellar. She nods. I can't help crying. I feel oddly abandoned as I watch them put their coats on and walk out into the night.

As I brush my teeth, I picture them supporting each other's arm, trudging through snow to our house. Mutti is still in a jail cell. I don't know what jail looks like – Only that she is surrounded by metal-strip walls, similar to our kitchen-window railing. "Don't be mean to Mutti," I think, addressing the Gestapo sternly in

my mind "Papa, are you safe in your hiding place?" I hide my head under the covers and share my loneliness with my doll.

"Have I grown?" I ask Oma, on the following Wednesday morning, as she carries my suitcase in one hand and holds my hand in the other. A thick blanket of gray clouds hang overhead so not even a glimmer of sun can escape. Frau Schultz wiped a few tears away as she kissed me good-bye. They all said they'd miss me, which made me feel kind of good. Herr Schultz gave me a small, green glass jar of odd- sized buttons. "For your collection," he said.

"No, Sweetie. "You're still my little mouse. Since last Saturday, there is no growth. Although," she tweaks my ears," these have grown. Maybe now you'll hear me better. Your Mutti was released yesterday from the *Grosse Hamburger* prison. She is resting at our apartment; Tante Gerda is taking care of her."

"Will the Gestapo come again?" I ask. "And have you heard from Papa? Is Rudi in the cellar? Do you know if he's seen any mice?"

"One question at a time. We don't think the Gestapo will come again. If they do, you will hide in the closet again, but I hope they won't come back." She squeezes my hand lovingly. "We don't know where your Papa is. We haven't heard from him since you last saw him on the street five weeks ago, but we assume he's all right," she says with a sigh. "It will be Christmas soon. Maybe Santa Claus will visit you."

"Will Santa know where I am?" I ask.

"Yes," she says, and pats me on the head. "He finds all children every year."

I rush to see Mutti when I get home. I feel a rush of warmth and deep joy to see her again. She is resting on my bed in the workshop. I inspect the dark circles under her eyes; her face looks drawn and thin. Her arms are covered up so, I can't check for bruises. I pull a chair near her bed, sit down and stroke her head. A bleak feeling overcomes me. She smiles at me, without crinkling her eyes. "I've been waiting to see you, Mutti," I say. Her blue eyes are bloodshot.

"Oma gave me an aspirin for you," I say, handing her a glass of water.

"My wound is beyond pills," she says, "but I'll take it." She throws her head back and drops the pill in her mouth. It seems to exhaust her. I nuzzle my face against her cheek. Her eyelids begin to droop, I realize she needs sleep. I tiptoe out of the room. An hour later, I go in to check if she's still breathing. The blanket across her chest rises slightly. She looks like a breathing ghost, I report to Oma. She tells me that Mutti needs time and rest. "She had to stand a lot while in prison. She couldn't sit at all during the day. Time and love from us will heal her," she says.

"The Gestapo taunted Elli," Opa says later in the afternoon when he sits at the kitchen table reading the newspaper and sipping beer from a tall glass. "They said she's a fool for protecting Hans and accused her of *Rassenschande*." He pounds the table with his fist, causing some beer to spill. "They threatened to walk her down the street with a sign -- like we've seen other poor souls -- Will they never leave her alone?" He wipes the table with his newspaper and turns the page.

Oma just nods and continues to roll cabbage leaves for tomorrow's Christmas Eve dinner. She told me that my young eyes are better than hers, so I tie the string around the rolls before they are placed into the large kettle.

"They know he's with Mia," Oma says, patiently spooning the same amount of ground horse meat and rice into soft green leaves.

Opa notices my interest at the mention of Mia's name and returns his attention to the newspaper.

"The harvest was poor last year," he reads aloud. "Farmers picked potatoes too early last summer, and seed potatoes are scarce."

"They just don't want to believe that Elli knows nothing, absolutely nothing," Oma says. As she pushes a curl back from her forehead, she quietly adds "Thank God."

"I wonder where he is," I whisper to myself.

"We all wonder," says Oma, who hears everything. "But I'm glad I don't know, and I don't want to know."

When Mutti gets up for dinner, her hair is uncombed and there is a crease down one side of her face. I offer to brush her hair and lean over to kiss her cheek. She takes her hand and presses it against mine. She breaks her bread into little pieces and drops them into her broth. After Mutti finishes two full bowls, Oma is satisfied. Tante Gerda, the hollows under her eyes deep and black, insists that we play cards after dinner. I hold Mutti's cards because her hands tremble noticeably. She has one winning hand after the other. "You're so lucky," I say, immediately wishing I hadn't. "I'm lucky, for sure," she says with a hollow laugh, "a regular *Glücks Pilz* (lucky mushroom.)"

The following morning, I push the white curtains aside and stare through

the living room window at gently falling snow flakes. Sunshine is blinding as it hits the snow packed street. Coming around the corner from *Rykestrasse*, a ragman is holding the reins of a slow-moving horse, while he sings out: "*Lumpen, Eisen, Papier.....* (Rags, Iron, Paper.") The back of his flaming red wagon is half full with rusty wheels, stacks of books and a mountain of clothing. A rust-stained mattress stands tall. White snow covers the tips of his load like the pictures of the Alp mountains surrounding "Heidi" from my picture book. Today is Christmas Eve. I hope that tonight Santa Claus will come and bring me presents. Feeling tingly with tiny butterflies floating in my stomach, I think maybe Papa will surprise me with a visit today. There is so much to tell him. Then I remember Mutti is here. I don't think she wants to see him; and if the Gestapo find out that she saw him they might put her back in jail, or arrest me. I guess it is better if he doesn't come -- in fact much better. I wipe away a trickling tear and feel guilt for hoping that he doesn't come.

After we fold the white sheets, towels and pillowcases that Oma embroidered for her trousseau, Oma tells me I can go downstairs to play with Lotte. "Come back in two hours for an early Christmas dinner," she says, checking the kitchen clock. Later, as I climb up the flight of stairs from Lotte's apartment, the strains of an unfamiliar song greet me. But when I enter the room, Oma stops playing.

"Please don't stop, I love to hear you play," I beg.

"I still have a lot to do," she answers. "Your mother asked me to play for her, it helps her relax, so I did." She tiptoes past Mutti's room, and I follow.

"Come, *Vivilein*, you can fill the tray with dishes and silver, so Gerda can set the table," she says.

Opa sits at the kitchen table covered with newspapers. Oma adds coal to the stove fire and starts the water for tea. Mutti comes into the kitchen stretching her arms out in front of her. I think she looks a little better. Her eyes are puffy from sleep.

"Can I help?" she asks Oma with a little smile.

"Certainly, we can always use another set of hands," she answers, handing Mutti an empty platter. She points to a thin long sausage and a black bread and asks her to make a pretty platter for us.

The apartment door opens with a clatter, and Ali bolts into the kitchen, red cheeked and full of good humor. "Brrrrrr," he says, sticking his icy hands around my neck. I screech with outrage. He clicks on the radio.

"The hay harvest was very poor last year," he reads, leaning over Opa's shoulder. "Because of poor weather, the cold and rain in July made hay-drying impossible." I am not sure what impact bad hay has on our lives, but Opa enjoys reading farm news, and I always pay attention to his reports.

"I think of you as a newspaper farmer," says Ali, making me laugh. The voice on the radio reports that air-raid planes are passing over Hanover, heading for the city of Braunschweig. Opa says that after they pass over those cities, Peine is next, and then Berlin. As if on cue, the rising and falling shriek of the air-raid siren sounds.

"I guess we'll celebrate in the cellar again. I knew this would happen; I could have predicted it," says Oma. Then turning to Opa, she says, "Bring me the covered bowls from the dining-room table." Oma hands Gerda Rudi's filled dinner pail.

Quickly, she ladles stuffed cabbage rolls into each of our buckets. Mutti picks up the plate of sliced bread, covered by sausage sections, which she was just topping with pickle slices. Ali carries two suitcases to the cellar, and I bring both our food buckets.

We take our regular bench seats, as if they are reserved just for us. Oma passes the sausage platter to the neighbors. Frau Bauer, Lotte's mother is there in her usual shapeless black dress. Then, she offers us a tray of holiday cookies. Yesterday, she let me help by placing a precious raisin in each center of the unbaked cookies.

Herr Keller coughs before he shouts the latest war bulletin. Oma claims that shouting is his way of making up for his short size.

"Though there has been a slight set-back, Germany will win the war in 1945," he yells, fingering his *Hakenkreuz* (Swastika) tie pin. "Hitler's plan will surprise everyone," he announces, causing Opa to squirm and mumble something under his breath.

"My sister," Herr Polder says, "is afraid that if Germany loses the war, everyone's going to die.... We'll all be shot, -- men women and children." He links his hands behind his neck, as if the thought doesn't frighten him.

"If the Nazis win, there is no doubt who will be shot,-- men women and children," Opa whispers across me to Mutti.

Droning airplanes are approaching. The constant hum is loud and getting louder with each minute. It's hard to picture small airplanes dropping huge bombs. Planes have to be small and light, I figure, or how can they get off the ground. Bombs probably expand when they leave the plane. I hope to never see a real bomb. I hope we lose the war, although I must never say that to anyone. If the war is not

lost, we will all lose, Oma says. I don't understand, but I do know that I am always afraid.

"It's Christmas wherever we are. Let's all get together and sing," Frau Bauer tells us. "Everyone gather round." Herr Polder removes his wool cap, which he always wears regardless of the season. He lights the five candles clipped to the wreath he brought down.

"Oh Tannenbaum, Oh Tannenbaum wie Grün sind Deine Blätter." (Oh Christmas tree, Oh Christmas tree how green are your leaves.) Ingrid Dosch's soprano voice stands out, making the rest of us sound better than we are. The planes are overhead. The sky must be filled with dark planes, wings spread, spitting bombs over the city. Oma says the planes are good to us, although that is hard to understand. They will defeat Germany so that Papa and my family can live. I hope I don't die before I can live.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Angry explosions crash. Frau Bauer continues to sway her hands, encouraging hearty singing to the background music of the war. The menacing noise is drowned out by our songs for a little while. I think of Uncle Rudi, separated by a thin wall but mountains removed from the rest of the group in the cellar. He's right next to us. He can hear us talk from his silent corner of our coal cellar. Tante Gerda listens for Rudi's tap and let's us know when to make noise. When everyone is in the cellar too long, Uncle Rudi has to go to the bathroom in his pail, and we have to help make noise to cover the sound. I've never heard him yet.

Herr Dosch pats his short beard and winks at Ingrid with pride, as he passes

cups of hot cocoa from the large thermos he brought.

After the flickering candlelight is out, I curl on a blanket at Oma's feet and listen to the grown-ups talk about Christmas spent in the past with large gatherings of family and splendid food. My friends and I have no such recollections, I think to myself as I doze off. There has always been war, and it seems like there always will be.

It is early one morning in February of 1945. We've been trapped in our house cellar for two days with dim oil lamps as our only light. Mutti returned to her apartment shortly after New Year. I haven't seen her since. Herr Keller, his face alight with relief, is carrying a bucket of water and a big smile.

"The *Führer* is very encouraged," he clears his throat and shouts, tilting his head to check his tie pin. "The Russians will cave in very soon; victory is around the corner, according to this morning's report." He turns to Frau Bauer and tells her in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, "I timed it just right. Got water boiled plus heard the *Führer's* radio report."

Oma listens with furrowed brow and groans under her breath. She is spreading *Schmaltz*, (rendered fat) on black bread for our breakfast. I'm sprinkling the salt on it.

"I can easily live without that man and his damn reports. We're probably the only family for miles around who prays that the war ends and Germany is the loser." Tante Gerda nods in agreement. "So I hope he's wrong about that report," she continues. Opa slices an onion for his bread, but Oma and I wrinkle our nose at

Opa's offer to share.

Herr Polder, wearing a brown wool cap, announces that he is building a coffin in his apartment. His mother died some weeks ago, and the morgue agreed to keep the body until a coffin is available.

"It appears," he tells us, "that there is a shortage of coffins because there is no wood. I was told that people make them out of the cardboard panels that are used to replace smashed window panes. But now," he throws his hands in the air, "there is a shortage of the cardboard. Plus, all the grave diggers had to join the military service, and my relatives and I have to dig the grave ourselves in the family plot. If anyone can spare a side of wood, maybe from an old dresser or something," he motions a rectangle with his hands. "I've got most of it built. I just need the cover and two planks on one end, then I could finish the coffin." The neighbors commiserate with him and murmur that they will check their furniture.

"We're almost out of bread," Oma observes. "I must get some right after breakfast."

When we finally step out of our house door, the morning light is too bright. I shield my eyes with both hands and squint. Then I realize it isn't sunlight that is blinding me, but thousands of bits of flaming paper that cover the street— a rain of fire. Blazing paper blankets the shimmering pavement. It's impossible to walk without being burned. The paper is light-greenish in color and burns and burns, without turning into ashes. I look into the flames, wondering out loud what keeps it burning.

"It's phosphorous paper," says Oma. "It can burn for hours, but I can't wait

that long or we'll be stuck in the cellar without food. This is a new war maneuver, I guess," she says, sounding resigned. We watch a few minutes before trudging upstairs.

"We have to work fast. Who knows how soon the next attack will come, and then we'll be hungry. I'll try to bake something with the little flour there is," Oma says, peeling an onion. "Vivi, you can stir the farina soup, after the onions are browned."

Tante Gerda comes into the kitchen. "Rudi's thermos is empty, and he's out of food," she announces, as she sets down half a bucket of coal.

"You can cook him rice. That's filling. We also have carrots and potatoes for a quick stew. Let's hope we have time to finish before the next assault. How is Rudi doing?" Oma asks as she salts the dough.

"He's very stiff. His "shell" is so cramped down there, but he's managing," Gerda answers. "He says he'll never complain about anything again if we survive."

"Is your bathroom system working out?" Oma asks. She sprinkles flour and rolls out small doughy circles for three round loafs.

"Yes," says Gerda. "It's going fine because I know that the short wall is best for receiving his tapping signal. I get down early so I can sit against that wall. I always sit in the corner, although sometimes Frau Bauer gets to it before me." She's finished rinsing the bucket and makes a pot of fresh tea.

"It's fortunate that we have a private coal room, I can visit him without arousing suspicion," she says.

"The Schultzs have a common coal area," I say. "The stork brought them a

baby boy; they're calling him Heinz."

Tante Gerda is totally preoccupied. She's peeling the potatoes and carrots, and is not paying any attention to me. She'd rather continue talking to Oma.

Today I can't get any attention.

"Is the soup finished?" I ask, bored with stirring.

"Let me see," Oma says, patting the flour off her hands. "Yes, you can stop."

We eat our dinner in the apartment, and I get to sleep in my bed all night long. But by seven the next morning there already is a long bread line snaking around the block. We patiently wait many hours to purchase our ration of bread, while the baker shoves loafs of dough into the oven.

"All our supplies are low. I hope Opa gets some meat or sausage at the butcher shop. I'll bet that line is even longer than this one," Oma says. She writes a list while we wait without moving. "We need potatoes, carrots, turnips, onions, plus lots of dry goods. The flour is gone."

After we buy the single bread loaf allotted today, we walk to the neighborhood produce shop, *Kluster's Frucht & Gemüse Laden*. (Kluster's Fruit and Vegetable Store.) A big sign on the door reads, *Juden und Hunde unerwünscht* (Jews & Dogs not welcome.) "Come along. I'd rather go out of my way or do without than give them my business. I refuse to spend my money at Kluster's," Oma says, holding my hand tightly. "Why do they have that sign Oma?" I ask.

"It's a way for little people to make themselves feel important. Unfortunately, everyone doesn't feel as I do. Look how crowded their store is. "It's appalling to

group people and dogs together as shoppers. Personally, I prefer any dog to those shopkeepers." She spits on the sidewalk. I am shocked because I've never seen her spit. "There aren't any Jews left to shop anyway," she says bitterly.

I hold her hand tightly, afraid that someone will point their finger at me and call me a Jew. We walk many blocks to find a produce shop without the hateful sign. The vegetables are almost sold out. Oma picks four pounds out of a bin of potatoes sprouting eyes. Two pounds of soft carrots, some onions and a large wilted cabbage.

It takes all day gathering supplies; and when we're almost done, the air-raid siren calls. There is no time to go upstairs. We rush down to the cellar, and Opa soon follows with our suitcases. Oma tells me to run and sit in Tante Gerda's favorite corner to hold the seat for her. When Tante Gerda comes down, she brings me my doll, explaining that Ali ran upstairs to help old Frau Hesse, who is bent with age and always gives him a coin or a sweet for carrying her suitcase.

Weightless, glittering doors are floating. I never see an enemy but know he is lurking. I feel the danger. I must open a door. Papa is calling; he needs me. The doors are on fire. I can't touch them. Flames lick my hands when I test the doors one after the other. I can't scream. I am afraid that when I open my mouth a flame will jump in. "Papa. "Papa. My voice croaks. Something touches my head and frightens me. My hair is stroked and then my cheeks. Fingertips dance across my arm.

"Vivi,Vivilein. Wake up! You had a bad dream.... Here, you dropped your doll," Oma says. "I'll tell you a story, while you play and change her dress. I even

have a new *Puppen Lappen* for you. Let's make a new shawl," she suggests. But I don't feel like playing. I worry about Papa, wonder where he is hiding. Is anyone helping him like Opa is hiding Rudi? I wonder if Papa is in a cellar like me. I cradle my doll and snuggle my head in Oma's lap while she continues to stroke my hair.

"There once was a handsome prince ..." is how all of Oma's stories begin. I often picture Papa as my handsome prince: He comes on a white horse and slays evil green dragons and releases me. Sometimes I prefer to pretend that I am the rescuer, splashing through rivers, riding my white horse. "Come on White Pearl, I urge the horse. We have to save Papa."

Days turn into weeks. The bombing is intense and absolutely relentless. There never is enough time to reach the shelter. We are afraid to walk the 10 blocks and recede to our cellar daily. Herr Keller coughs to clear his throat on a February morning. "Germany is winning the war. By the time the *Führer's* birthday comes on April 20th, we will have won this war," he says, with glittering dark eyes. I feel the cellar floor tremble through the soles of my feet. Herr Polder turns his back on him, ignoring the report. He thanks the cellar people for their wood contributions for his mother's coffin. He tells us that his mother finally had a burial.

"Although I doubt that she would have approved," he says, adjusting his bent spectacles, "I did the best I could. Two friends and my relatives took a chance a couple of Sundays ago. We all hacked away at the hard earth. It took us nearly ten hours until we finished. My relatives and I pooled our Schnapps, as enticement and to keep us warm. We were all totally drunk but the job got done." He shakes his

head sadly. "I know my mother would die again if she knew."

March and April are spent almost continuously in the cellar. School is discontinued. The Bauer children are all in the cellar. Tante Gerda always sits with her back to the connecting coal cellar wall. We cough, laugh and talk on signal.

Ominous hissing, followed by explosive crashes, again and again.

"By those sounds, there is nothing left to bomb. It will be amazing if any building is left upright," Opa observes. We settle down for another restless night on the cellar floor. One pillow is under my head and one is covering my head to block out long bursts of gunfire.

On Tuesday, early in the morning, the cellar door is opened. A man's tall silhouette appears in the opening. Sunlight outlines his arched back. In silence, we face the door. Herr Brannt looks into the distance and announces: *"Der Krieg ist vorbei. Hitler ist am Achten Mai, 1945 an der Spitze seiner Truppen Gefallen."* ("The war is over. Hitler fell leading his troops on May 8, 1945")

CHAPTER NINE

THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING

"*Der Krieg ist vorbei* (the war is over) did you hear?" Frau Hesse calls to someone in the rear. I am stunned, afraid to believe what she confirms. I turn to look at Oma's face and watch tears roll singly down her cheeks as she looks straight ahead, wide-eyed into space.

"I am so disappointed, deeply disappointed," Herr Keller sobs. "They betrayed us all." His shoulders shake, and his gesturing hands don't address anyone other than the gray cellar wall. "I trusted our *Führer*," he says. His back is rigid; his face slack. He took the people's love and made a mockery of our loyalty."

"Yes," Ingrid's father agrees. "As I patched worn shoes and made rubber soles in my crummy workshop, I pictured a new, victorious Germany. 'From Ashes to Victory' was my dream. We would have had such a glorious parade." He throws his head back, and behind closed eyes he is crying for his lost dream.

"I followed the news closely. Daily radio and newspaper announcements

proclaimed how 'we are advancing and will win the war.' Goebbels promised a miracle. How ironic," Herr Keller laughs without cheer.

"All the while we were losing our men, country and the war, " adds Herr Polder bitterly, hatless for once.

"They had to know," says Frau Bauer with conviction. "This was no secret to them. " She wipes her eyes with a lace-trimmed handkerchief. "All the sacrificing, suffering and turmoil to lose a war. Who will feed and raise my four children now? I lost my husband and brother. Both were killed in useless action within the last two years. If I could only have them back." She hides her face in her hands. Lotte clutches her skirt, and Ruth pats her back saying, "I'll get a job mother. We'll all help you."

I can't understand the meaning of Herr Brannt's words. Oma wipes her tears away with the back of her hand and squeezes mine meaningfully. I squeeze back, feeling the wetness of her eyes. "Vivi, it's over," she says. "The nightmare is finally over." I glance at Opa mussing Ali's hair playfully.

"Can I bring Rudi out?" Gerda whispers to Opa.

"Lets wait a little while and test the street first."

Across from me on the other side of the cellar is Frau Hesse. She is facing the open door and smiling. She decides to lead the way. We follow her up the staircase out the cellar door. Her back looks very broad from my angle, bundled in layers of sweaters and an overcoat.

Impatiently, I rush through the hallway to the street, which pulls us like a magnet. Our house door is ajar. My eyes are not used to the bright sunlight,

compared to the dimness of the cellar; innocent sunshine in cruel contrast to the dead city I see.

My eyes fixate on a bloody, uniformed arm. The body lies nearby. I shiver and tighten my jacket flaps. The streets are littered with glass, bricks and blocks of concrete. Huge craters caused by bombs or grenades mark the sidewalk. Across the street, balconies are torn from the building facade; only a concrete outline is left. I spot a partially filled window box, sprouting two red geraniums amid the enormous devastation.

Dead horses in helpless positions litter the street. Some are dismembered. I see a burnt army truck with the dead driver hanging over the steering wheel, a soldier's helmet pierced by bullet holes and two rifles, side by side. My feet are riveted. I am afraid of colliding with something dead. People huddle in the doorways and spill onto the cluttered sidewalk. Across the street a child wails. Even Herr Keller is speechless.

A man's voice shouts an unconvincing, "Heil Hitler." No one responds. As if in a daze, I walk to the corner of *Rykestrasse*, listening to the gritty sound my shoes make. There are signs of desperate door-to-door, house-to-house, and street-to-street fighting. A tin awning, twisted and peppered with bullet holes, advertises *Frische Fische*. (Fresh Fish.) There are bullet holes in house doors and windows. A bloodied, silver-braided army hat lies next to its owner....

"Lost lives in uniformed corpses, and so young," Frau Bauer sighs.

"Just a kid," Opa agrees, looking down at the boy's lifeless eyes. His blond hair is spread on a bed of dried blood. "I hope his parents won't see him like this."

In the middle of the road, a man is carving meat from a horse carcass. Others work on the shank. I pass an old woman in a man's tweed overcoat, carrying an empty platter and large kitchen knife. The street smells of war, smoke and death. Above the sky is blue, dotted with tufts of white cloud.

"Who could have suspected the devastation that took place over our heads? Soldiers fought and died 20 feet above us. I almost don't care who won; I just want this war to be over," Frau Hesse says. "No more bombs. My grandson should come home in one piece. I pray every day that he's alive and not in Russian hands. They are very cruel to their prisoners of war, according to everything I've read." I feel sorry for her. She is frail and old, more hunched over than ever. I take her bony hand as we circle a fallen balcony, rusted and shedding concrete.

Opa is speculating which of the Allies will occupy our area. "I hope it won't be the Russians, but it probably will be, as they are fighting from the East," he says. "I don't care as long as the nightmare is really over."

I've never lived without war or persecution, and it's hard to understand that this is the beginning of a new life, as Oma tells me. I wonder what is a new life? "Will the Gestapo bring Uncle Herbert back? Is Mutti safe? Can Papa visit soon? Does the Gestapo still want me?"

"You ask too many questions, child," Oma says, patting my head as though I am an obedient dog like Zito.

Half way around the block, Tante Gerda says that she is convinced that the war is really over. Everyone agrees. Opa turns around, and we walk back. She rushes into the house and down the cellar. I follow to get my doll and finally visit Rudi's

seven-month hiding spot. Tante Gerda uses a key to unlatch the rough wooden door, saying, "It's me." I hurry in ahead of her and trip over his shoes that are attached to extended legs. He stares at me, as if we've never met.

"Uncle Rudi, it's me, Vivi," I say. He hides his smudged face under a blanket; his back rests against a pile of coal.

"Ach Rudichen, mein Süsser," (Oh, Rudi, my sweet,) whispers Tante Gerda tenderly, as she crouches down and takes his black hand in hers. "Our days of fear are over; the nightmare is over. Germany lost the war. Hitler is dead. I can bring you upstairs."

"I heard a lot of commotion, but couldn't follow what it meant. It's over?" He shakes his head in disbelief. "I thought it would never end." He looks at us with tears streaking his stained cheeks. Tears he doesn't hide.

Tante Gerda removes the blanket and helps him up. He grunts as she supports his elbow. "Easy now," she says. "Rest your hand on Vivi's shoulder. Your muscles are weak even though you tried to keep yourself strong."

I look at the tiny space Rudi has shared with a pile of coal plus two buckets and wonder how he managed. He is so much taller than I, that my head fits under his arm when we walk. He slowly pulls himself up on the bannister. Each step is like a conquered mountain. Tante Gerda checks the hallway left and right. She covers his head and shoulder with the black blanket. Frau Bauer comes in from the street, a large cooking pot pressed to her chest. She doesn't seem to notice us; her eyes are on the overflowing red meat in her pan.

All through the night a huge fork lift scrapes the streets. I sleep, picturing

dead horses and bodies everywhere. We wake to the sound of rumbling tanks. Metal clanking on cobblestone sends chills through me. Transfixed, I watch the procession from our living room window. A blast of damp, cool wind blows in. Our window ledge is draped with white sheets, long enough to touch the window beneath.

Army tanks are manned by helmeted soldiers.

Long-nosed machine guns are directed at each house.

Rows of jeeps with mounted machine guns follow.

Our street comes alive with soldiers marching three abreast, weapons drawn.

At dawn, a loudspeaker voice from a truck ordered everyone to hang large white cloths from every window in each house to show surrender. "Those who don't obey the order will be brought to the street, lined up against the house wall and shot," the voice said.

We have been conquered by the Russians. That evening we eat dinner silently.

Single arms, lonely legs, all float past my eyes. "The Russians are here," buzzes through my dreams. Papa's face drifts by. Up and down he bobs. I'm afraid I will choke on a finger that wants me. I fight back and wake up hitting air.

The Russian soldiers wear side-buttoned yellowish green tunics, fastened with broad black leather belts. Loose pants are tucked into high black leather boots. Ignorant boys and men -- some of whom have never visited a city or used a flushing toilet -- walk with the confident swagger of the conqueror. Months ago, rumor has

it, they were confined in prisons without hope. Released to fight Germans at the front, they were finally allowed to act out all the stored hostility. Now they have been unleashed on civilians. Brutal behavior is the result, and civilians can't fight back.

Anything the Russians want is theirs. Soldiers defecate on the sidewalk or squat under trees. Rumors of cruelty and mistreatment of women abound. Stories of horrendous group rapes are particularly frightening. Women are taken from houses and the street, forced into parked trucks, and assaulted en masse. Such incidents occur daily all over the city. There is no defense for civilians, just as there was no protection for Jewish people during the long 12 years of Nazi rule.

Mutti lives in the western part of Berlin, Charlottenburg. She can't come to visit. Her part of the city is ruled by *Amis*, (Americans,) English and French. We wish *Amis* were the ones to occupy us instead of Russians. I haven't seen her for many months. Frau Bauer won't let Ruth or the other girls out of the house. She is afraid that no one is too young for Russians. Ali tells us that pretty Sonja, his favorite girl from across the street, broke her wrist, but her mother won't take her to a doctor for fear of the Russians. I see mainly the elderly food shopping. Attractive women do without makeup and stuff their underwear with pillows to fake pregnancy when on the street.

Plumbing, electricity and public transportation are destroyed. Whole streets and blocks are empty. Windows are shattered; stores are barren. We still depend on kerosene and candles, as we have for the last 5 months. Oma covers her head with a scarf and wears ugly, oversized clothing. We drop off a pair of Gerda's shoes with

Herr Dosch. Hitlers large photograph over the cash register is gone, replaced with a photo of his daughter. The *Hakenkreuz* flag on the wall is gone. Oma lets me go with her because I promise not to let go of her hand. Her raincoat is buttoned up and a covered food basket on her arm is filled with a bag of flour, salt, lots of potatoes and a cabbage. A lot of coupons from her ration card got used today. She holds my hand tightly as we pass a soldier who greets us with a three-toothed grin.

"*Drastye*," he says, I assume that's hello in Russian, and I answer, "*Dosviedania*," which I think means Good-bye. Oma turns around and says we'd better not shop anymore today. When I see Herr Keller on the stairs, he nods. Gone is the *Heil Hitler* greeting that he never failed to give. His shiny *Hakenkreuz* tie pin has been replaced with a silver bar.

Upstairs, Rudi paces the hallway, back and forth like a caged animal. "Building my muscles," he says to me. Tante Gerda announces that lentil soup is ready.

The doorbell rings and I eagerly rush to answer it. Whenever it rings, I tell myself that it is Papa, alive, with a triumphant grin. I am crushed each time it isn't. Ali says he forgot his keys as he comes into the kitchen, holding an air pump he borrowed from his friend Norbert. Ali pulls a military cap out of his pants. He tilts it on his head and clicks his heels together in a military salute.

"Where did you get that hat?" I ask him, surprised and curious.

"I found it in the park," he answers. "There are piles of uniforms and all sorts of other military clothing just lying around. I saw a woman dump this load of clothing on top of another pile. They are afraid that the Russians will find a

uniform in their house and will shoot them because the Russians hate the German military. No one wants to own anything that belonged to German soldiers."

"So what makes you think that it is so smart for you to have a hat? Do you think that Opa will let you keep it? I think you should bring it back where you found it before anyone else sees it," I say, feeling superior to my older brother.

At six o'clock, he is still slouched at the kitchen table, having stuck the hat back in his pants out of sight. He is laying out various bike parts. Ali worms a screwdriver out of my grasp when I hear the hiss of steam. I look up, but Oma has already stepped over a bicycle wheel. She takes the pot off the stove and sets it on the counter.

"I guess we'll eat mashed potatoes tonight," she says. "That's not exactly what I planned with our lentil puree," she mumbles.

After his breakfast the next morning -- eaten later than mine because he always oversleeps -- Ali calls to me from the front door. "Come with me Vivi. I need your muscles, you can help me get today's water." I love to do anything with my brother, and feel very proud that he needs me. I carry two buckets, he carries four. Two are strung across his neck with a broom handle, and one is in each hand. Mid-block we pass a house shelled to rubble. "That could have been ours," he says. In the park, people squat around a square room-size concrete opening, filled with water. It was used during the war for water chains to extinguish fires.

"Remember the buckets we passed?" Ali asks. I picture all the neighbors passing buckets to douse the fire on our roof. Luckily, only one apartment was damaged, and the occupants were able to continue living in it; but I remember that

in the cellar their clothing always smelled of smoke, and I avoided sitting next to them. The people around the water hole lower pails, jugs and tin cans. Ali offers to fill a young woman's bucket. She watches him with one hand folded over her protruding belly and the other one gripping the hand of a little boy. I can see to the bottom of the water hole. Leaves, bits of paper and rope float in our drinking water. We drop our buckets on a hook attached to a heavy rope, fill them and pick out pieces of soaked cardboard .

"Where are all the trees in the park?" I ask, as we slowly return home.

"Berliners have cut them all down. Everywhere."

"Why?"

"To provide firewood for households. The last winter was a disaster. You know that. You just like to ask questions."

"No I don't," I pout.

"Even the *Tiergarten* park is without trees," he says. All the trees were cut down during the long, cold winter." I trip on the jagged pavement and accidentally spill some water, but Ali doesn't get mad.

"Don't worry; it's not good water anyway. No matter how much we boil it, we'll still get dysentery. It can't be helped," he sighs. "Look on the bright side. At least it keeps us from getting fat, not that we've ever needed that excuse anyway," he mutters.

At home the water is boiled and strained through a white linen towel and strained again. Many fleas and small bugs are collected in the towel.

"See," Ali teases, "real meat in our soup for a change." By evening, we all get

severe stomach cramps and frequently have to use the bathroom until we are all exhausted.

"Oma, my leg hurts me," I complain the next morning. "It pulsed and throbbed all night." She adjusts her glasses and examines my leg by probing the outside of my calve with two fingers. "It feels hot and hard," she says. "It looks like a nasty boil has formed." Oma props my leg on another kitchen chair and soaks a white cloth in hot water. "These hot compresses will soften the inflammation," she says, "if we apply them constantly." By evening, the boil bursts under a hot towel. Lots of ugly pus and blood oozes, but it feels a little better. Ali comes into the kitchen holding his nose with a grimace.

"Even downstairs I could smell fried liver and onions. I just hoped it wasn't our dinner, but," he snaps his fingers and grins, "I knew it was."

"Look at my leg, Ali," I say, feeling sorry for myself. He pretends to not see it, and places his nose inches from my leg. "You can't see with your nose," I say as he pulls back.

"You're one of the boys now," he announces. "'Half of Berlin has them," he says, as he crashes into a kitchen chair. "I'm starved. Are we going to eat or just look at the food?" He winks at Rudi like they are conspirators in the quest for dinner. "I have a throbbing carbuncle on my neck," Ali says, slipping liver and onions onto his fork.

"And I have three on mine," says Rudi, gesturing with his hand as he pulls up a chair. I realize that I've often seen him sit on a kitchen chair, while Tante Gerda carefully shaves his neck. Then she applies hot compresses on his neck like

Oma did for me. I didn't connect his neck with my leg, but now that Ali calls me one of the boys, I don't mind the pain as much.

"Can you show me yours?" I ask Ali.

"Sure," he bends forward with fork still in hand.

"I just see a bandage," I say, disappointed not to glimpse a worse case than mine.

"Well, of course, goose. I can't keep it exposed. My shirt would rub against it. It's all due to malnutrition and unsanitary water, which can't be helped right now," he says. "When you next see a man on the street with a bandage covering his neck, you'll know it's a boil. You're lucky yours burst."

"Now that is enough of this unpleasant dinner conversation," says Oma, pushing her plate away in disgust.

"I was just going to say that often boils have to be lanced. You'll have a scar; but don't worry, you'll still find a husband," he says with a grin, as he mashes his potatoes in gravy.

Two days later, our upstairs neighbor, Frau Hesse, knocks on our door.

"I'm going to the warehouse on *Rykestrasse*," she says to me. "It's open, and you can keep whatever you can carry out. It's considered abandoned property." Opa immediately folds the newspaper he is reading and gets up. Oma dries her hands while I gather my sweater. We start out the door. Outside, a cool wind blows, although it is the middle of June.

"By what authority can we get whatever we are getting?" Oma asks Frau

Hesse.

"Because it's abandoned property, my sister-in-law told me. Apparently, the government hoarded merchandise there during the war, and the locks have been broken." She shrugs her shoulder. "Anyway, people are clearing out the warehouse."

"We can use everything," Oma says. "Do you think that it's food?"

"No, I think it's something else."

While they talk about what kind of stuff we might get, I look up at the *Rykestrasse* Synagogue roof as we pass by. Strange, how undamaged it is. I peer through the tall, wrought iron chained gate and admire the Jewish star. The cobble stoned circular pattern is unharmed in the courtyard. Rudi said he will bring me here for services one day. He says God watched over this synagogue to keep it from harm. I didn't ask him if that meant that God didn't watch over the ones that were burned down. I am not that comfortable with Rudi to ask bold questions that might irritate him. He looks much better, but he looks old. His face is pulled downward by long severe lines. Papa looked younger when I last saw him. I wonder where he is. Maybe he's dead, as I've heard my grandparents whisper? It's been over a year since he bought me my beaded purse. I always took it to the cellar with me during air raids. Oma even brought it to me when I lived with the Schultzs. I wonder how big Heinz is now that he's six months old. Rudi's hair is very skimpy. He has a bald spot at the back of his head, and pulls fragile wisps of hair across it. Mutti hasn't seen him yet.

A strange sense of freedom overcomes me whenever I'm on the street now. I

can't get enough of it. Boldly, I stare into stranger's faces, watch their eyes, without casting mine down. It's a little game I play.

Lots of people pass me carrying bolts of gray woolly-looking fabric on their shoulders and green bundles shoved under their arms. They look like elves from my storybook, gathering twigs in the woods. Everyone is too busy with their prize to play my game. An old woman pauses at the corner to set down all her bundles and rearranges them. We swerve around her. The woman turns to look at us, brushing wisps of gray hair from her eyes. I stare right in her face, unafraid.

At the warehouse two big doors are wide open. People are waiting their turn. After half an hour, a man hands Opa a gray fabric roll, which he hoists on one shoulder, and another one for Frau Hesse which he puts on the other shoulder. Opa supports them both with each hand. Oma and Frau Hesse carry a box of sea-green material; it feels as soft as clouds.

"How will you use the gray wool?" Oma asks Frau Hesse.

"Oh, I'm saving this for my grandson. When he returns from the war, nothing will fit. I can make him a jacket or coat out of it," she says. "His parents died during the bombings in Dresden; I lost my Hilde. The boy probably doesn't know that yet. I'm all he has left," she says with trembling lips.

"There's enough material here for winter coats for Ali and Vivi," says Oma happily when she unrolls the fabric on the kitchen table.

"I don't want a jacket out of the same fabric as my little sister," says my brother. He polishes shabby black shoes.

I go to bed with a sense of wonder. What a thrill to simply fall asleep wearing a nightgown with no day clothes underneath, without half-listening for the siren's call. Still even the slightest creak wakes me in the night so I can be ready to rush downstairs to the cellar. The war is over, I remind myself. I can sleep.

At eight-thirty the following morning, Ali and Rudi have already left for the city. Oma tells me at breakfast that they've gone on a secret errand in the area of *Alexander Platz*. "It will take a long time walking, as there is no public transportation," she says.

Tante Gerda cannot go food shopping with us. It's too dangerous because of the Russians. *Kluster's* Fruit and Vegetable Store removed the sign that forbade Jews and dogs in their store, and their *Hakenkreuz* flag is gone. In my mind I still see the bold black swastika against a circle of white on the background of blood red, swaying on the wall. Oma will never enter the store, she says, her hair and forehead covered with a dark green scarf. We pass three Russian soldiers; one waves to me. I wave back, but Oma tells me not to. "Keep your eyes downcast," she says. I don't. The street is deserted, except for other elderly shoppers. In the produce store she fills the basket with potatoes for our potato pancake-and-sausage dinner. Our last stop is at the corner tavern to surprise Opa with a pail of beer. It's the same tavern where he was denounced by Herr Haase. He had a stroke when he heard that Germany lost the war and can't come downstairs anymore.

Tante Gerda cooked pea soup while we were gone. The flat smells of onions, but that's better than the spilled beer and cigarette smoke in the tavern. I help peel

potatoes. Tante Gerda grates them for our pancakes -- one of Rudi's favorite meals.

By late afternoon, Tante Gerda checks her wristwatch. "I wonder when they will return," she says more than once. Her hand trembles as she applies fresh lipstick and brushes her disheveled hair. Oma flips the crisp pancakes and jiggles the pan by its handle to keep them from burning. Ali and Rudi are not home for dinner at seven. Tante Gerda doesn't even pretend to eat. She sits drumming her fingers on the kitchen table.

"Stop that," says Oma. Tante Gerda jumps up and goes into the living room, where we hear the window creak open. After dinner, Opa and I squeeze next to her. "Darkness doesn't come until after eight in June," says Opa, scratching his head. "And it is a very long walk." I look beyond the gauzy curtains. In the pale moonlight, a woman wearing a round hat is walking her dachshund. The night is quiet. Squares of soft yellow light from the neighboring houses reflect on the wide, empty sidewalk.

"What's taking them so long? My stomach is flip-flopping like crazy," Tante Gerda says, checking her wristwatch once more. I too am worried, especially about Ali. When I leave to get my sweater, she cries: "Two men are walking down the street; I think it's them.... Yes, it's them!" She calls out of the window when they get closer: "Are you two all right?" She opens the door before they knock and attacks them with questions. "What happened? Why are you two so late? I'm a nervous wreck," she says with a high-pitched laugh.

"Well, that makes three wrecks. You almost never saw us again," says Rudi, walking ahead. "Everything looks so wonderful in here; another close call ends in

your kitchen." He pulls out a chair, sits down and closes his eyes. His cheek is twitching again. "We need a Schnapps, right Ali?"

"Yes, tonight I don't want to hear that I'm too young for alcohol. I almost didn't get old enough for it," Ali answers.

"You boys look pale," Opa says, and pours everyone a glass full of liquid -- the same color as beer without the foam. I get milk. "So start talking," he says, tipping his chair back. "Tell us what happened."

Rudi begins: "We had a long walk to the city. Our goal was one of the few government buildings still standing and operational. Several Russian soldiers came alongside us, kind of looking us over. They talked among themselves, laughed and nudged us with their rifle to follow them."

"Wait a minute," interrupts Ali. "This is an occasion. 'Prosit.' (cheers.) He raises his glass.

I feel very grown up and involved, as I clink glasses with everyone sharing the toast before drinking.

"We didn't dare protest because they didn't look at all friendly and anyway, who argues with an armed Russian." Rudi looks at us with raised eyebrows and takes another sip. "We obeyed them. They obviously had orders, because any men we passed on the street were checked over and picked up in the same manner. No old or infirm men were chosen. All were young to middle age like us. We followed them two-abreast. We were not allowed to talk to one another. They made that very clear when one soldier kicked a man violently in the butt for talking. Finally, at about five o'clock, they seemed to have collected the number of men they wanted.

We were about 20. The one who was kicked was limping. I was starving, having eaten nothing since our breakfast roll.

"By the way," Ali interrupts. "We are seriously hungry. I hope you have some dinner left for us. "

Oma gets up to reheat the sausage-and-potato-pancake dinner. She resets the kitchen table for them. Gerda is immobile; she just clutches Rudi's hand, with a nervous smile and flushed cheeks. I feel the need to be close to Ali and take a chance by sliding onto his lap. Generally, he pushes me off, saying I'm too heavy, but tonight I am thrilled that he lets me stay.

"So now we are marched with purpose in the direction of the central U Bahn station," Rudi continues, after another deep gulp. "At each street crossing, a soldier watched us with a drawn weapon. Meantime, I had to go to the bathroom so bad, I thought I'd explode. I believe that because Ali is a very slender, young-looking boy -- his red hair and baby blue eyes make him look 13 instead of 18 -- " Turning to Ali, Rudi says, "Don't ever complain again that you look too young. You may not get all the girls you want -- although it seems to me, you only want Sonja anyway -- that fact saved our lives today. At a street crossing just before the U Bahn station, an equally young-looking Russian guard apparently took pity on him."

Rudi wipes the sweat off his brow, swallows more Schnaps and continues: "Undoubtedly, because the Russian knew what would befall Ali in Siberia, he motioned with his head to Ali to slip down the side street he was guarding. Thank God Ali had his wits about him, because he pointed to me; and with a quick head nod, the Russian let us both escape down his street." He sucks his breath in and very

slowly lets it out. "The first thing we did was to relieve ourselves against a wall. Then we headed for home, avoiding main streets. It took longer, but we didn't want to chance another man-hunting patrol."

"I've heard that the Russians take men off the street and transport them to Siberia to forced labor camps. The families don't even know what happened to their men," says Tante Gerda. It's probably a one-way trip, and I'd never get you back. Oh Rudi, someone is always snatching you from me."

"Well, love, I'm yours with a huge blister at the back of my heel, see?" Says Rudi. "Can you do something with that?"

"Yes," says Gerda, "I read that soldiers pierce it with a needle and thread and let the thread dangle through the blister for a day to draw out the liquid. I'll get that started."

"Why were you in the city?" I ask, swallowing a yawn. Sipping from Ali's drink has made me drowsy.

"Yes, what's so important that you had to go to the city?" Tante Gerda asks, while she lights a match and holds a needle in the flame till it is red hot to sterilize it.

"The reason I was in the city is because I wanted to get the papers ready so I can finally marry you! An eight-year engagement is long enough, my dear." Rudi kisses her hand and strokes her flushed cheek. "We would have married years ago, if the Nazis had allowed it, but it was against their law, as you know." Then turning to Opa he says. "Maybe you'd do us the favor and get the necessary papers for us. I'd better not go into the city again; to escape the Nazis only to end up in Siberia is not a

good exchange.”

I am ecstatic that a wedding is to take place. I've never been to a wedding. Oma must have suspected something, because she's been working on a beautiful white dress with pink embroidery. When I asked Oma about the dress, she said that she was sewing it for a little Russian child, a daughter of one of Opa's customers who happens to be my size.

“What's her name?” I asked. Oma told me her name is Tanja, she is six-and-a-half years old like me, and she wears large colorful bows pinned to her hair, as is customary in Russia. When Oma fitted the dress on me, I envied the lucky Russian girl who was to wear it. Now, Oma tells me that it's mine. I can't wait to wear it and will feel like a princess. Tante Gerda's dress has been in her closet for years. She sewed it long ago, when they almost got married but were stopped by a pronouncement that Gentiles and Jews could no longer marry. Now, she reluctantly has to let the seams out because her body has changed.

Finally, it is Friday. Ali makes the long round trip on his bicycle to bring Mutti from the English sector to us. When they finally arrive, his face is flushed from the effort. “We had such an uncomfortable trip on his bicycle; it must have taken at least three hours. I won't be able to sit for a week,” Mutti says, massaging her bottom and smoothing out the wrinkles in her fitted dress. “The streets in the East sector are in really bad shape. No repairs have been made at all. In fact, the streetcar tracks have been removed. I heard that everything movable is being sent to Russia. At least we're here. “She opens her arms to me. “Quickly, hug and kiss me,” she says. I give Mutti an extra big squeeze because I haven't seen her in a long time.

With relief, I notice she looks cheerful. Her cheeks are pink, and her blond hair is curly. I like the dark green dress she is wearing and her red nail polish. She looks at herself in the hallway mirror and brushes her hair. Turning away from the mirror, she opens her purse and takes out a small bottle of *Mai Glöckchen* perfume and rubs the perfume into her throat and wrist. She asks if I'd like a little on my throat. Nodding "yes," I hold very still as she puts some on me. Now I, too, smell like a lily of the valley. I'd like to show her my leg, tell her I'm one of the boys, and complain about dysentery because my stomach hurts after every meal.

"Have you heard from Papa?" I ask.

"No," she snaps. I feel like I already asked the wrong question, and remain silent about the rest.

"I haven't heard from him either," I tell her, although she didn't ask me. Mutti brought Gerda a lovely pink rose bouquet with long white ribbons. She pulls out a rose and pins it in my hair. My private dream is that Papa will appear at the wedding as a surprise and see how pretty I look.

The bridal couple walks arm-in-arm. Gerda is smiling her natural smile; the pearl blends well with her teeth. Because there are no rabbis, synagogues or congregations left, Rudi and Tante Gerda decided on a Justice-of-the-Peace marriage. Tante Gerda is wearing a long white crepe dress with a short train, which I hold up on the street. A piece of white lace is attached to her auburn curls and she looks very beautiful. Rudi is pale, wearing an ill-fitting navy pinstripe suit that outlines his bony shoulder blades. Nevertheless, his bride tells him how handsome he looks

when she pins the rose boutonniere pin in his lapel. The Schultzs, some friends of Tante Gerda, plus our family, walk behind the bridal couple the six blocks to the official's house. The justice speaks very softly. I wonder if they can hear him better than I can. Rudi says, "I do." Tante Gerda's voice sounds muffled with tears when she says, "I do."

We form a line to congratulate them on the front steps of the bullet-pocked building. Opa's voice is rather stern, when he says: "Be happy. That's an order. You two owe me and each other that much." Franz Schultz snaps lots of pictures, even one of Tante Gerda and Rudi exchanging a kiss. I like the group shot. I stand between Mutti and Oma. I've grown. My head reaches Mutti's chest. Where would Papa stand I wonder.

"I think Rudi is lucky to have her, although I am not sure he deserves her," I overhear Opa whisper to Oma, as we follow them home. Gerda is holding her own train up and listening to Rudi.

"Well yes, he is very lucky," says Oma. "I hope you're wrong, because your congratulations sounded more like a scolding, Opa."

"I can't help feeling as I do. I don't like some of what I've seen. He's not very generous. Also he seems to have an eye for the ladies, but Gerda has never listened to the slightest criticism of her Rudi."

"He's the only man she's ever been interested in. With her looks she could have had her pick, but let's stop negative talk. It's their wedding, and she deserves the best. Let's hope she got it today," says Oma.

I wonder why they don't think Rudi is the best; he's always been nice to me.

Mutti takes Oma and Opa's arm, and I walk behind them.

Oma has been cooking for days. I helped prepare *Königsberger Klopse*, meatballs in a flavorful white sauce served over rice. Oma baked her specialty, *Bienenstich*, (Bee-sting honey cake,) topped with hard-to-find, slivered almonds. The table is covered with a white, blue-fringed linen cloth and Oma's good, blue-and-white *Hutchenreuther* dishes. It's a set that hasn't been used for years. The company silver and two crystal candlesticks flank a bowl of pansies. Before we start the meal, Opa toasts the couple with the pretty *Erdbeer Bohle*, drink, fresh strawberries, swimming in white wine. "To the long engaged couple, health, happiness and peace," he says.

During dinner, Mutti tells us that the Western sectors are being cleaned up, by *Trümmerfrauen*." (rubble women.) They are hard workers," she says.

"Ali got a job clearing rubble in my sector. He'll go home with me today," says Mutti. "His job starts on Monday. His pay is 60 *Pfennig* (cents) an hour, and he will work alongside the *Trümmerfrauen*," continues Mutti.

"What is a *Trümmerfrau*?" I ask.

"They are women who have the difficult job of clearing, stacking and cleaning bricks from the bombed areas," Mutti explains. "That's why the Western sectors are looking better than the Eastern ones. Women do the job because Germany is short of men."

"Yes," snaps Opa. "Those swine! Those savage bastard Nazis!" He pounds the table, grinding his teeth. "We know why Germany is short of men, boys, girls, women, babies, grandparents and families," he says with contempt. He flings a fist

toward the wall. Oma jumps up and stands behind Opa's chair, placing her hands on his shoulders to calm him.

"Now, Emil," she says sternly, using his first name. "We are celebrating Gerda's wedding. This is not the time to get upset." Opa pushes his chair back and leaves the table.

"Of course we all feel that way. Our feelings and heartache are as painful as Opa's," says Mutti.

Opa returns a few minutes later, carrying a full glass of Schnapps, plus the half full bottle which he sets on the table. "Sorry, the dinner is delicious. Compliments to the chef." He holds his glass up to Oma.

I am stunned by Opa's eruption at the table. Although he's lost his temper before, this is the first time it's happened while we're all together. For years, everyone complained only in whispers, even in the privacy of our apartment -- afraid of listening ears, fearful of a friend or neighbor accusing us of disloyalty to Hitler or exposing our Jewish connections. We were constantly terrified someone might find Rudi hiding in our coal cellar.

I think of my tiny, Oma Ert, standing next to stately Opa Ert -- both smiling and welcoming me. They were such gentle people. I remember pretty Tante Hanni and Uncle Herbert's haunted eyes. He called me his little *Maus* that awful day at the race track. It's a day I still relive. They were all murdered and will never come back. Walking home from the wedding service, I listened to Mutti tell Oma and Opa that just yesterday evening, a very thin man came to visit her. The man, Herr Schulman, was at Auschwitz with Uncle Herbert. He saw Mutti's ad on a bulletin

board, asking about the where-abouts of anyone from the Ert family. Herr Schulman knew nothing about my grandparents or the rest of the family, but he did know Uncle Herbert in concentration camp. "We made friends in the cattle car taking us to Auschwitz," he told Mutti. "I remember that on the transport cattle wagon we called out for water. And the railroad workers called back, 'Aren't you God-damned Jews dead yet? Where you're going, you won't need water.'"

"So when they now say that no one knew where we Jews were being sent... Don't tell me that. Those railroad workers knew that our cattle cars trains were on a one-way trip."

"At Auschwitz, while working together, Herr Schulman and Uncle Herbert sometimes shared a crust of bread. And they had a pact: If only one of them survived, the survivor would tell the family of the horrors, of the incredible insult to humanity they witnessed. Herr Schulman said he is not strong enough to talk about much that happened. He just wanted Mutti to know how life ended for Uncle Herbert. It was Herbert's last wish that someone who cared should know -- if anyone survived to tell.

"Herbert, unable to endure concentration camp horrors any longer, went to the high-voltage electrical fence that surrounded the camp. A guard taunted him, said that Herbert didn't have the guts to electrocute himself. "Just wait for the gas chamber; we are very efficient," the guard said. Herbert touched the fence, electrocuting himself. Five days after the electrocution, Auschwitz was liberated by the Allies.

" 'We didn't know that we'd ever be liberated. We didn't know that the war

was almost over.... We didn't know,' Herr Schulman said.

"Then he asked me if I remember Friedman.

" 'How could I forget him,' I replied.

" 'Well, eventually, Friedman could not meet his quota of daily victims and was himself sent to Auschwitz. When he arrived, he was beaten to death by inmates before the Nazis had a chance to gas him. Herbert and I were on a work detail carrying clothing from the ante-room of the gas chamber. We did not participate. Anyway, we were so weak that we couldn't beat a fly to death. 'Before he left, Herr Schulman said he'd talk to me again, another day."

Thinking about this story, probably caused Opa's outburst. It breaks my heart, too and gives me nightmares. Sometimes, I cover my ears. I don't want to hear the horrible details. But my family and the other victims had to endure it. I only have to hear about it. I must listen. I owe it to them because I survived.

But today is Gerda's wedding. I love having my brother around and don't want him to go. I try not to pout, but my thoughts of Herbert and losing my brother to the West, cause tears to roll down my cheek. I push my plate away and set my elbows on the table. Ali tries to console me and explains that at 18 he needs to work. "I have to start earning money," he says. "I'll visit often, though. Don't forget that Sonja lives across the street, and I will certainly come back to see her."

I am not sure if that makes me feel better or worse.

"Do you want to clear rubble?" I ask while I have his attention.

"No, of course not, but I do get extra food rations and Mutti is getting me a job

at her club as soon as possible. So until then, it's something to do; and 60 *Pfennig* an hour is a lot of money."

"What's her club called?" I ask.

"It's an English club, 'The Blue & White Club,' he says. Mutti works there as a waitress.

"What does a waitress do?" I ask.

"Oma, play the piano for us," Mutti suggests. "It's been so long since I've heard your favorite songs."

"I'll tell you later what a waitress does," Ali whispers in my ear.

Oma plays a song about white lilacs blooming. The soft bell-like sounds are irresistible to Gerda, who sings along, ending with a mournful love song to Rudi. Mutti stands beside her for the last refrain, swinging her slim hips gently, arm draped around her sister's broad shoulder.

Oma asks me to sing "*Die Meisner Porcelain Puppe*" (The Meisner Porcelain Doll) a routine, she taught me. Curving my arms, dipping my head and blinking my eyes like a precious doll, I feel confident even when my voice cracks on high notes, because I am surrounded by loving smiles. With my eyes half closed, I can feel Papa watching me, smiling. I think he's blowing me a kiss.

Later on, I hold my dress with the tips of my finger and curtsy in front of Ali, who is wearing a white shirt and navy suit. I think he's the handsomest person present. It's also the first time I've ever seen him so well-dressed. "Come Ali, please dance with me!" I beg. To my surprise, he leaves Sonja's side and twirls me around. This is a great day I decide, even though my-hoped for Papa did not appear.

CHAPTER TEN

STEFAN WANTS TO SHOOT A BEAR

"You are a lucky girl," Oma says.

"What makes me lucky?" I want to know.

She explains that I have the opportunity to go to a summer camp. "It's a camp for Jewish children who survived the war. You will meet lots of boys and girls," she says. Because I have outgrown most of my summer clothes since last year, Oma cuts up one of Tante Gerda's old cotton dresses, and makes me a yellow-flowered skirt and matching blouse. Our upstairs neighbor, Frau Hesse, brings Oma a large piece of green parachute silk. "I am too old for sheer silk," she says with a chuckle, "but you can sew something for Vivi." The day before I leave we go shoe shopping because my shoes are too small. I'd like to have open-toe sandals but we find only lace shoes, boring black tie shoes, which I wear home to get my feet used to them. On the way home we meet Frau Hesse. She is guiding a tall sandy-haired boy. One of his eyes is covered by a black bandage, and he's resting on crutches, supporting his underarms as his left leg trouser hangs empty.

"God gave me my grandson back," she says, "Rolf was in an American camp. They saved his life." She pauses with her hand on his elbow; he stands in silent gloom and mumbles, "*Guten Tag*. (good day.)"

I wake up excited on the day I'm to leave for camp. It is a perfect July day – sunny, with clear skies dotted by soft white clouds. I am the only passenger in the open-backed truck for a long time. I swallow the last bite from one of Oma's liverwurst sandwiches just as the rumbling stops. Before me is the front of a large white house, surrounded by green bushes. Three boys and five girls climb up the high step. They don't seem to know each other. The driver lifts up the smallest boy.

"This is Stefan," he announces, holding the boy over his head like a prize. I show the tall girl next to me how to hold on to the seat to avoid falling over when the truck makes wide turns.

"My name is Vivi, I say. "What is your name?"

"Swetlana," she says. "I am Rusky." Her face is small and fearful, and a green scarf is wound around her head. Other girls shout out: "Anna from Germany. Petra from Lithuania. Martha from the Ukraine. Peter from Germany. Joseph from... Ruth ... Stefan ... The names are jumbling together, just like the motor's constant rumble. I'll never remember them all. Someone asks what we expect from camp.

"I'm going to shoot a bear," says little Stefan.

"How can you shoot a bear? You need a gun," asks the boy named Joseph, while chewing the nail of his middle finger.

"I'll get a gun from the German soldier who guarded our camp. He said he'd

give me his gun if I'd say he fed me out of turn. He told me to remember that he often gave me cheese and bread.

"Did he?"

"I don't think so, but he said he did and that I'm too young to remember."

"He probably didn't," Joseph says knowingly, gnawing on another finger.

"Did you tell the Amis (Americans) that he did? What camp were you at, Petra asks.

Her hair is cut short like a boy's. So is Martha's and Swetlana's.

"Dachau. They never asked me. Anyway his gun was so heavy I dropped it when he gave it to me. It fell on my foot." Stefan leans over and rubs a bony little hand over his shoe. The dark numbers on his arm look huge. "It still hurts when I walk," he says.

Next to him is the chubby boy, Peter, who pokes him with an elbow. "What will you do with a dead bear?" Stefan sticks a finger in his nose and shrugs his shoulders.

"I want a brown face and legs before I go back home," says Petra. "I just want to lie in the sun, get bleached by sun. With closed eyes, her face turns upward. "The sun was good in Lithuania," she says with a loud sigh.

I think that's a good idea and say, "Me, too." Most of the other boys and girls have foreign accents, but at least they speak German. I speak nothing but German and am impressed that they can speak another language.

Petra and Martha say that they are anxious about a "camp." I notice the concentration camp tattoo numbers on Petra's arm.

"We'll have fun," I say with unfelt certainty. Finally, the truck stops in front of a large brown, wooden cabin, and we jump onto the unpaved dirt road. My legs feel wobbly, like I am still bouncing in the truck.

"My name is Hannelore," says a slender girl with brown braids wound around her whole head. "I'm the girl's counselor. "She puts one hand into her red shorts pocket. "And this is," she says, pointing to a tall man in green shorts, "Jan." He comes from Denmark, and he's the boys leader. "We will work together to help you enjoy your stay." She blows the brown whistle around her neck and says that this will be our signal to pay attention to her on our walks.

"We are both 22 years-old. We'll make friends, exercise, have fun, and eat good, healthy food." he says with a pleasant accent, pushing straight black hair off his face. A brown whistle dangles from his neck, too.

I hope Hannelore will let me brush and braid her long hair.

They walk us to brown wooden cabins surrounded by trees, and we unpack our belongings before our dinner meeting in the mess hall. Hannelore pins name tags on us and says we should wear them ever day. This is a good idea, but not everyone can read. I am intrigued by her pretty belt buckle, delicately carved out of shiny brass. I hope she wears it often.

"Fill your plate with as much food as you please," Jan says, pointing to the buffet table. We line up and proceed toward the smell of hot soup, simmering in a tall kettle, plus large wide bowls filled with rolls and fruit.

After eating spinach, hard-boiled eggs and rice, we are taken for a "get-acquainted walk" around our cabins. It's very pretty, but I feel vulnerable with so

much open space. I miss the confinement of streets and apartment houses.

Hannelore stops in her tracks and puts her finger over her mouth.

"Look and listen," she whispers. "Crickets chirp; birds trill; nature is celebrating your arrival."

After we brush our teeth, I climb into my stiff, new pajamas and get ready for bed. Hannelore hums a song under her breath. I wonder what makes her so happy all day long.

Later, Hannelore gathers her hair together at the back of her head and ties it with a white ribbon. Then she sits on her bed and tells us a story about animals that live in the woods. A baby rabbit wanders too far from his hutch and gets lost. I am relieved when she tells us the happy ending. After the story, Hannelore turns off the light. "The crickets are singing your bedtime lullaby," she says with a warm "Good night."

Noise is all around me, and I can't fall asleep, my ears hear everything: rustling sounds, snapping cracks, scratchy brushes against squeaky glass; my ears hear everything. Hannelore's cheerful, high-toned voice is whispering comfort. I'd like her to come to me, but know that Martha needs her more. The girl in the next bunk bolts up.

"Anna," I say. "You can't sleep either?"

"No. I miss my brother Peter." She brushes dark tumbling hair out of her eyes. Damp curls cling to her cheek.

"You'll see him in the morning again. Would you like to hold my hand?"

"Yes."

I am running. Running so fast I can't breathe. I feel that if I run fast enough, I can catch Papa. But when I almost reach the tip of his jacket, a door from nowhere shuts in my face. Growling teeth snap at my skirt. I sense hot breath; it chokes me.

I wake up gripping the bed frame. The room is dark, loud scratching sounds are everywhere.

I get up to follow the noise at the window; maybe the baby rabbit from our story wants to come in. A half moon outlines a dark branch knocking at our window. Silly me. I was afraid of a tree branch. There is no daylight yet. I pass Ruth's cot and trip over a shoe. Ruth turns over in her sleep and replaces a thumb in her mouth. Back in bed, I have a long wait until chirpy birds announce dawn. In the city I never hear birds talk, never hear their sweet voices.

The woods don't look as sinister in the morning. A blanket of dew covers the ground like rising smoke. I smile at the harmless tree branch that bangs against our window.

We gather on the mowed grass in front of the big cabin and follow Jan's lead in group calisthenics. After our breakfast of soft-boiled eggs, bread, milk and fruit, we are taught what Hannelore calls a "walking song." She distributes nine baskets to use and take home as a remembrance. We pick raspberries from scratchy bushes while we sing our new song. I feel like a character in a wonderful story-book, acting out scenes I've only looked at in books.

The days pass. Our confidence grows. After lunch the following Tuesday,

Anna, Peter and I push through the tall meadow grass to reach a clearing. We sprawl on the grass, and I play idly with one of the grass stalks while gazing at the tiny yellow flowers that dot a field far below us.

"I'll make a flower wreath for our hair," says Anna. Then, blinking her big blue eyes, she turns to Peter. "Peter, will you please pick some stalks for us" she asks.

Peter has brown curly hair and the identical blue eyes. His dimpled face is plump and soft. "Sure," he says, without a hint of teasing. "You have a nice brother," I say when he returns, arms full with long grass and small flowers. I am impressed. He's very helpful for a brother. I don't think Ali would pick greens for me. We continue to braid wreaths of clover and wild blue cornflowers.

"We are closer to God on this hill," I say, "or maybe just closer to heaven." "Heaven? You believe in heaven?" Anna asks, as if she's surprised.

"I think so," and images of my grandparents and Uncle Herbert float before my eyes. I like to think that they are in heaven, watching me.

"Do you believe in God?" Peter asks me.

"I guess so, doesn't everyone? Don't you?"

"I don't know what I believe in," he says, gazing into space and absently playing with an earlobe.

"Did your mother teach you to braid wreaths?" I ask Anna, as I start a grass bracelet for Peter, who is lounging on one elbow next to me. A shadow crosses her face. She bites her lower lip and shakes her head. Peter immediately jumps up, strokes her brown curls, puts a protective arm around her shoulder and says, "We haven't seen our mother or father for three years." I feel ashamed; but since the

subject is started, I ask, "Why not?"

"We don't ever talk about it," he says, "but you are our friend, and anyway, the bad times are over. We're just not used to freedom yet," he sighs. "In 1942, we lived with our parents in a beautiful house in a town near Berlin."

"Our house faced the lake," says Anna, dreamily twirling her hair through her fingers. "It was so pretty. I was five and Peter was six."

Peter drops to the ground and crosses his legs. "The bad times had started years before, but father, because he was the only doctor in town, thought that even though we were Jewish, we would be 'safe from harm.' Well, one day, when he came home for lunch, he told Mama that through connections he heard that our family was in immediate danger. The Nazis wanted our house and everything we owned, and in a day or two we'd be picked up. My father, using the same trusted friend, managed to buy two visas and two train tickets to England. Not enough for us four," he says, looking very sad. Tiny thorns scratch my finger as I carelessly braid the bracelet.

"We had a couple who worked for us for many years: Helmut drove the car and did many other chores, and his wife, Helene helped mother run the kitchen. They were kind. My parents took a big chance and told them of our family's dilemma. They kindly offered to take us to their home village and claim us as their children until the war was over and we could all reunite."

Peter looks at Anna, tips her chin up with his finger and says "Right?" She nods in agreement, and twists grass stalks till they are frazzled. "My parents did not have a better solution," she adds.

"For the rest of the day we packed. Father took money out of the bank, but not enough to alarm any officials. Plus, he gathered money and jewelry he had hidden in the house, which he gave to Helmut to pay for our upkeep. That day, Mother brought shoes to the shoemaker and a dress to be altered to a seamstress, just to keep things as normal as possible. Father returned to work after lunch. But that night, carrying only a small valise and my father's medical bag, our parents left by train for England. We boarded a train with our new 'parents' in a totally opposite direction, to a village named Teupitz, more than sixty kilometers from Berlin. It was a very sad night, but everything happened so quickly, and we were young and didn't fully understand what was really happening.

Anna is twirling curls with both fingers, her cheeks damp as Peter continues. "The village people accepted Helmut's explanation, and since he hadn't been home for many years, the community had no reason to suspect that we weren't their children."

He gets up and stretches his arms behind his head, while I bunch tiny white flowers with yellow centers. Now I don't feel as guilty for starting this subject because Peter doesn't seem to mind telling me their story.

"We attended the local school and had to call them 'mother' and 'father,' of course, but that was all right, because we always called our father '*Vati*' and our mother '*Mama*.' We've never heard from our parents."

"Never," says Anna, with tears trickling down.

"Well, to be fair, a letter with an English stamp could have been dangerous to receive. In small towns, everyone examines everything, Helene told us." Peter

continues: "In January of 1944, bombs hit the village and our house while we were in a shelter. Helmut moved us to his in-laws town, where Helene was born, and that's where we've lived since. But our parents don't know all this, and how can we be reunited if they can't find us?" He's including the sky with his question by looking up while chewing on a long grass stalk.

"At the end of our camp stay, a radio station is interviewing us all. The transmission will be heard in England, and we pray our parents will hear us," says Anna tearfully.

"Oh, I will hope so, too, with all my heart. I hope so," I add. I brush white petals from my skirt, and we all get up as if it's time for our next appointment.

"Let's do something nice," I say. "Let's go mushroom picking."

"That's tricky," Anna says. "Mushrooms can make you sick."

"I am practically seven years old, I know how to pick the edible ones. My grandmother has shown me how to choose them," I say.

We tiptoe past the cabins with napping campers, take our baskets from the bench and head for the woods. I feel more courageous with Peter and Anna. The trees don't frighten me as much as the open space; and after sharing their story with me, I feel we are tight friends. Anyway, Peter, is nine and a boy, he'll protect us, I think.

We choose three sturdy twigs, good for raising the underbrush while we hunt for the prize. It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to the the dark, cool pine forest. Soon, only tall trees loom overhead, with slivers of filtered sunlight playing hide and seek. I like the woods -- dark, quiet, full of promise.

Peter points to a suspicious-looking mound at the base of a tree. For some reason we whisper. A brown head is pushing through honey-colored pine needles. Anna brushes the needles aside, and a mushroom family is revealed. The ground feels cool and soft when I kneel down to inspect it. We pick only the mature mushrooms; the babies are left to grow.

"Avoid the ones that grow on tree logs, my Oma taught me; they are fungi and will make you sick if you eat them," I whisper. But I can't resist biting into the good ones. My hands smell of pine sap as I take small bites from many mushrooms. Also, I want to impress my friends with my knowledge. Our baskets are filling, and my stomach is aching. We find a clearing where warm sun hugs a fallen tree. We sit down and compare our baskets. Mine is the smallest, as most of my pick is in my stomach. The afternoon bell is clanging as I throw up as inconspicuously as possible. A night of chills, churning stomach cramps and bathroom visits follows. I wonder why eating something good can make me feel so terrible.

One evening Hannelore and Jan show a nature film in the big cabin. A black-and-white cow's face fills the entire screen. We laugh when she moos. When the film is over, Hannelore tells us that God loves us all -- animals and people.

"But God doesn't love Jews, only Christians," Petra says. "I am Jewish, and he doesn't love me. Germans in the camps told me that I smell because I am Jewish, and that's why we had to go into the chambers. But no one ever came back out." She opens her lips to say something, then shuts them in a helpless shrug. Martha jumps up to go to her, but Hannelore takes Petra's hand and bends over to ask her a question. I can't hear an answer, but she blots tears on her sleeve, and they leave the

cabin. At night, Hannelore pushes her cot next to Petra's and lets Petra brush her long hair while she tells us a story about God and Noah's ark.

As the last days of camp approach, we three -- Anna, Peter and I -- visit our favorite spot in the meadow to braid our last wreath. We drop on the ground, roll around and admire the vast blue sky. Sleek black birds streak by. Loud ducks fly in V formation. The radio interview will be this afternoon, and my friends are rehearsing their story. I brought a pocketful of juicy plums, most of which we eat. I decide to plant the last three plums, so that next year we'll have our very own plum tree if we return.

"Speak into the microphone," says the nice lady interviewing me. I tell of the close encounters with the Gestapo. "Speak up," she says. I squirm in my chair, not willing to reveal my secrets. I am uncertain if I should advertise for my father to please contact me. I am afraid he may be dead or that he is still in danger. In the end, I do plead with him to come back to me.

Anna breaks into tears when she asks her parents to please find them. I cry with her. Martha's story is the worst. I wish I had known how much she suffered: I would have made friends with her and given her more attention. Petra and she were close; they didn't really mingle with anyone German -- even the counselors -- until Petra said the awful things about being told that she smells. Then she let Hannelore befriend her.

"My home was in a ghetto in the Ukraine," Martha begins. "My parents told me I shouldn't have been born, but I was. In 1937. Later, when it got really bad, they even apologized for allowing me to live. They taught me that as a Jew in the ghetto,

my life is worthless. 'Less than nothing,' they said. I always tried never to attract attention to myself. I wonder if I weren't Jewish, would I be considered valuable and pretty? I've studied myself in the mirror, and compared to Christians, I don't look different. My hair and eyes are brown, my features are regular and I wash myself daily, now that I can." The interviewer dabs at her eye while Martha speaks.

"Germans and Ukrainians guarded our ghetto. They raped, humiliated and starved us for their entertainment, until they murdered us. We made friends with lice, roaches and rats. Daily convoys took Jews outside of town to dig mass graves before they were shot. We were all to be slaughtered. My convoy came on a Tuesday morning. Since then, I don't like Tuesdays. I was behind my mother when she was shot. Caught in her long skirt, I fell into the pit. I stayed motionless all day. All the while the guards shot and laughed, especially when people begged for their lives. That made them laugh more for some reason. I counted the shots till I must have fallen asleep. Actually, I thought that I, too, was dead. Now I know what it feels like to be dead, I said to myself." She brings her hands to her face and presses her fingers against her temples. The interviewer offers her a glass of milk which she sips.

"I awoke in the night, because mother's weight was too heavy on me. I crawled out and sat with mother, held her cold hand and asked her what I should do. Mother always told me what to do. I was afraid that the soldiers would come back in the morning, so I said a prayer for my parents, crawled between dead bodies and climbed out of the pit. Then I ran and ran and ran. All night I ran; during the day I hid. Once, I stole eggs as they were dropped by a hen. I even stole the chicken's dried-bread feed. Without knowing it, I ran toward the Allied forces. "

She covers her face with her hands, "I can't go on, sorry." She keeps her face covered and steps away from the microphone. The interviewer says that Martha is in a DP camp; and if anyone knows anything about her or her extended family to please contact the radio station.

Then the interviewer says: "Joseph has agreed to talk to us, but first I will give you some background information. He lived in Budapest, Hungary. His parents and siblings were deported to a Polish concentration camp in the summer of 1944. We know no other facts about this nine-year-old boy."

The lady motions to Joseph and brushes his thumb away from his mouth to interrupt his chewing.

"My name is Joseph, he says. "One day in May, Mother sent me to the corner store for bread and rolls. I left in a hurry, forgetting to put on my coat with the Jewish star. Someone from our block recognized me as a Jew, and two big boys followed me home and cornered me in my house foyer. They said that I needed a lesson I'd never forget, because I didn't wear the star. They beat me till a man came downstairs and stopped them. Before they left, they said that the police would come for me because they were going to report me." He raises his thumb but stops himself midair. "When I told my mother, she got real scared. She sent me to a nearby cousin's house. From there, I was sent to many different houses; I don't remember how many. This went on till the Russians liberated us, then they sent me to a DP camp. I hope to immigrate to Palestine or America." Although the details differ, all the other stories have the same sad theme; suffering and survival.

I exchange addresses with my friends, who promise to write. I don't tell them

that my writing needs lots of work. When I am allowed to go to school, I have to catch up quickly. I hope that everyone will be reunited with their parents or families.

"Helene said she'd keep us if we don't find our parents. We are not unhappy with them. They are kind, but they are not our family," says Anna on our last night in bed.

The next morning a group photo is taken before our truck arrives. We are promised copies of the picture. Just before boarding, I run to my plum hole and dig up the three plums and offer one to Martha.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MY DREAMS LIVE IN ITALY

"Are you happy to have me back?" I ask. "Did you miss me a lot?"

"Come and sit at the kitchen table," Oma says with a secretive smile. "I have a surprise for you."

I am glad to be home again; the familiar kitchen smell, the crystal salt and pepper set -- my Oma. I patiently wait for my surprise. Maybe she sewed me a new dress, or Mutti is visiting. Oma returns to the room, smiling with pleasure and waving an envelope like a flag. The thin, crispy paper makes crackling sounds. It's framed by diagonal red and blue stripes. She drops it in front of me. I read my name is on it.

"Look at the reverse side to see who sent it," she says. I read Hans Ert and an address I can't understand. I jump up. My face feels like it's on fire. The envelope flutters in my trembling hand. I have to sit down again, or I will fall.

"Is it really from Papa?" I ask.

"Yes" says Oma. "Open it and I will read it to you."

My Dearest Vivilein,

August 28, 1945

Your Papa is alive and well in Milan, Italy. How I managed to stay alive and get here is a long story – too long for a letter. One day when we are together, I will tell you everything. For today, please know that I love you, miss you, and hope this letter finds you, Ali, Oma and Opa, your mother and the whole family well. Life is a little hard right now: I am trying to find work in a foreign country where I don't speak the language well, but everything will work out now that the war is over. I will not return to Germany, even though all danger is gone; the only thing I miss in Berlin is you. It wasn't easy, but coming here saved my life. Mia is with me. We are married, and she sends you her regards.

I hope to hear from you very soon, so I know this letter has reached you. I hope your house has not been destroyed. Send me a photo, please, because I don't have any. I had to leave Berlin without taking anything personal. Love to all. Big hugs and kisses for you,

Your loving Papa

I take the letter from her. My heart is pounding. "Papa touched this paper," I repeat to myself. I hold it to my nose; the crinkly paper doesn't have a special smell. "He encircled a paper kiss for me." I press my lips to his paper kiss again and again. I place the page next to my cheek and roll it in a circle. Finally, I place my head down on my arms and rest the letter in front of my face. "He's alive. He's not coming back. He's in a foreign country. He's married. He's alive." I am relieved, thrilled and sad. I picture his confident smile over a year ago at Paul's restaurant. It was the last time my Papa held me. When will he ever carry me again? Tears dribble on my arm.

"Italy is far away. I've never been there, but I am sure that you will see him again one day," says Oma, breaking my reverie.

"How will I ever see him again?" I ask her. "Do I have to go to Milan, Italy? He's never coming back, he said."

"Would you like to write him a letter with my help?"

Yes, I answer. She brings paper, inkwell and her red feather pen. We sit at the kitchen table and I try to think.

Dearest Papa,

My surprise is so great that I don't know where to start. There are so many questions I have to ask you, but you wrote that there is too much to tell in a letter. I am so very happy that you survived the war. We were all very scared for you. The Gestapo came to us and I was questioned by them about you and where you were hiding. I gave nothing away; I protected you, Opa said. He said you'd be proud of me. He took me out of the house rolled in a rug so they couldn't find me. I was scared. I've worried about you for so long. It's almost a year since you and I spent an hour together. I miss you. I clipped my finger, but it has grown back together. It looks ugly, though. Mutti had to go back to jail after the Gestapo couldn't find you. Tante Gerda and Uncle Rudi are married; Oma baked *Bienenstich* for the wedding dinner. Oma asks if you remember her *Bienenstich* cake? I'm still friends with Lotte Bauer. I am sorry that I didn't run across the street to you. I thought you didn't want me

to, but later I wasn't so sure. Write me and tell me if I should have come. It's been on my mind a lot. I had dysentery and a boil. Please write me again soon. I love you. Tell Mia hello. I returned from a camp today. I talked on the radio at camp and asked you to contact me. Did you hear me? I met children who suffered very much during the war; now they live in DP camps. I am glad I don't. I wish they had a good Oma and Opa like me.

Many kisses from your daughter, A paper kiss from me
Vivi

P.S. Uncle Herbert was killed in Auschwitz. We know for sure because Herr Schulman told Mutti.

My head is snuggled under my puffy feather quilt. Our apartment is quiet. Tick-tocks echo in my room; soon the cuckoo bird will announce nine o'clock. I can't stop thinking that I face a world without Papa. Before the letter, I dreamed he'd just show up. I didn't doubt it. Now I've lost my dream. I kiss his paper kiss daily. I have so many thoughts and experiences saved up to share with him: my leg scar, getting sick on raw mushrooms at camp, my longer hair. I can't write everything. He doesn't know about the Schultzs; he doesn't know about my life. I know he's alive, but I still won't see him or have my own father. He'll never come to take me for a ride again -- not a short or a long one. When I fell yesterday and skinned my knee, I imagined how Papa might comfort me, pick me up and kiss my knee better. He never will. My dreams live in Italy.

I am walking down a long narrow alleyway. Walls are closing in on me. The opening is squeezing me; I must get through to him. Fear squeezes my throat. Arms groping ... I have to fight break through.

"Vivi, Vivilein." Oma sits on the edge of my bed. Her hair drapes over one shoulder of her nightgown. She looks pretty, holding my hands.

"You had a bad dream Vivi, everything is all right, you were calling for your Papa."

On the first day of school Oma fries eggs and gives me advice: "Don't talk to strangers. Always walk with friends. Look out for cars and horse-carriages." When I am ready to leave, she hands me a traditional, first school-day *Süsse Tüte*, (sweet bag) a long pointed paper bag, filled with sweets and fruit. It's a misty, damp morning, colder than usual for September. Opa snaps a picture of me in front of the house. I wear a broad smile and my hands are filled with his worn brown leather briefcase and my sweet bag. He kisses the top of my head and takes my *Süsse Tüte* upstairs. I will eat my treats when I get home from school.

My mouth goes dry the closer I get to school. I hope the teacher doesn't ask me to state my religion. How will I answer if she asks why I am in the first grade when I'll be seven years old next month. I certainly don't want to announce that it's because I am a *Mischling* and was not allowed to attend. Groups of pushy boys and chatty pairs of girls arrive from all directions. I wish I was "them."

After school, Lotte passes me with her current best friend. They are huddled

under one umbrella. She waves. I feel bad.

"How was school?" Oma wants to know, while I remove my soaked black shoes and wet socks. Even though I used the umbrella I had in my briefcase, my feet got wet from puddles. I wasn't careful because I was talking to myself about two-faced Lotte.

"It was fine," I say. I've always been told that I am small for my age. But I felt awkward amid six-year-old classmates, since I am a whole year older. My head poked above too many others. Oma hands me a crumbled newspaper to stuff into my shoes. She hangs my damp socks over the stove.

I don't yearn for Mutti the way I miss Papa. I feel like I always have to protect her from pain, not burden her with mine. Especially where Papa is concerned. I always thought of Papa as my protector, even though he was not here to protect me. Ali lives with Mutti. I miss him. Oma is my favorite. I wish she didn't have headaches. This morning when I came into the kitchen, she was sitting at the kitchen table, her head pillowed on her arms again. "Shsh," she said. "Don't tell anyone." That frightens me.

Tante Gerda and Rudi have their own apartment across the street from us, and Opa rents a street-level shop in our building. He opened "Gimpel's Watch and Clock" repair shop. He has many Russian soldiers as customers. They like *Uhri*, I think that is the Russian word for watch. Their watches break frequently because Opa says that the soldiers are too rough with the delicate mechanisms. However, they are not unfriendly to us. I am not afraid when I'm in the shop with Opa.

Instead of paying with money, they pay with sugar, coffee, cigarettes and my favorite, cocoa. This pleases Opa.

Just before Christmas a package arrives from Papa. It is my first package from him, ever. I remove the layer of crumbled newspaper and reveal a pair of shoes -- chocolate-brown suede shoes. They are decorated with a top-stitched open toe and -- wonder of all wonders -- a sling strap. Never have I seen more beautiful shoes. I hold my breath as I try them on. I will wear them regardless of fit, but luckily for me, my foot has a little room to spare. Oma says she can make the strap one hole smaller for me and stuff the toes with soft paper. I am reluctant to part with them long enough for her to do so.

Another layer of crushed newspaper and round balls Oma calls "oranges" appear, along with long, yellow, brown-spotted fruit she calls "bananas." Papa's handwriting is small and scribbly, but I am eager to sound out his words. He thanks me for my letter and says he carries the photo I sent him in his wallet. Yes, he didn't want me to run across the street to him that day in November. He was running away from the Gestapo and planning to leave Germany. He wanted one last look at me. Luckily, I was playing on the street. He didn't want to endanger me by being seen with him. One day he will tell me everything. He hopes we have a nice Christmas and wants us to enjoy the fruit. He thinks the shoes will fit, as Mia chose them for me. He is working hard and is learning Italian. He loves and misses me and sent me hugs and an encircled paper kiss.

While I read the letter, Oma peels one of the long yellow fruits. She tells me to take a bite. I don't think I like the soft, sweet, mushy stuff in my mouth, so I swallow it quickly. Oma says it is very fine and exotic, whatever that means. Oma cuts the orange skin, which sprays tiny drops as she peels it back carefully. The orange is divided into sections, and she hands me one. The flesh is sweet. It bubbles with juice as I chew. The white seeds are bitter and spoil the sweet orange flesh. Oma advises me to spit the seeds out. While eating, I can't keep my eyes off my shoes. I feel like a princess. I bite into the orange peel which tastes bittersweet. Oma says she'll make marmalade out of it.

I sit down immediately to thank Papa for the wonderful Christmas present. I wish I could share my delight with him in person; writing is not enough. It's too formal and impersonal. Unfortunately, I don't write that well yet, and don't want to lose my intimate feeling for him. I've always kept him close to me in my thoughts, but Italy sounds so remote. I don't think he can read my mind any more. He doesn't know I am a real schoolgirl. I get homework. I wonder if he would be proud of me if he knew.

"Oma, I'd like to get my ears pierced."

"Aren't you too young for that?" she asks, drying her hands on her apron.

"Lotte Bauer and two girls in my class have their ears pierced," I say. "I'd like to wear real gold earrings."

"We'll see," she says. It's almost Christmas, and Santa will be able to come

this year now that the war is over.

Last night we went to church for a holiday service and saw a Christmas play. Today, I am not allowed to peek into the living room, even though I have the good excuse to get my doll, which I left in there. I've been in the rabbit room all afternoon, playing with the litter of bunnies and fantasizing what Santa might bring. Opa raises rabbits for occasional meals. Ali hates the job of disposing of the dung. He carries a filled bucket to the nearby park, digs a hole and buries the mess. It's illegal to own livestock. Ali always wears the smeared brown jacket hanging on the hook behind the door for the dangerous work. I've made a long paper chain to decorate the tree. The goose Opa has been feeding for weeks on the balcony is tonight's dinner. Oma says I must stay with the rabbits until she calls me.

The door bell rings. I used to hope that Papa would come. I wish I could still pretend.

"Someone's at the door. Vivi, see who it is!" she calls. I rush down the corridor and open the door.

It's Santa.

"Is a girl named Vivi here?" he asks in a deep, deep voice. His tiny eyes are hidden by a big red hat, and his mouth is smothered by fluffy white hair.

"I'm Vivi," I say eagerly.

"Well follow me then," he says in a low deep voice, as he stomps down our corridor. He opens the correct living room door. On the end table, I glimpse a small pine tree with lit candles on every branch. Mutti, Uncle Rudi, Tante Gerda, my Oma

and Opa, all smile at me. They are squeezed together on the sofa, like they're expecting a performance. Mutti helps herself to an orange slice from the plate of goodies on the cocktail table. Papa is here in a way, I think, as I hold my breath.

"Come here," Santa says, pulling a package out of the sack resting on the piano stool. "You may open it now." A lovely brown velvet dress with white collar and cuffs unfolds from the paper. I love it; the fabric reminds me of Oma's bedroom drapes that she took down some months ago. She said they needed a good cleaning and were really wasted on her window. Next, he hands me a small package containing yellow Amber beads -- they look like the ones I've seen Oma wear -- plus a brown velvet dress for my doll that matches mine. Santa gets up and says he has to go.

At the living room door he stops. "Oh, oh, Santa is getting old," he says. "I almost didn't see this small package in my sack. Yes, indeed, one more present for you." He shakes the box; something jangles inside. I unwrap the small white box and discover a pair of gold heart-shaped earrings. "They are perfect," I say. I can't wait to show them to Lotte."

"So many children to visit; so little time," he says. I walk him to the door and thank him.

Ali arrives as I'm trying on my new dress. The color matches my Italian shoes.

"I was at Sonja's house. Sorry I'm late. She sent you a present." He gives me an embroidered handkerchief that she made for me. In one corner, she stitched a large, powder-blue "V."

"You missed seeing Santa," I say. "I wish you had been here. He didn't leave you a present."

"Well," he says. "I couldn't be here for Santa, but I am here for the goose. I've been salivating all day. The smell attacked me," he playfully clutches his throat, "on the staircase."

CHAPTER TWELVE

FISHING IS BETTER IN THE RAIN

Oma brings me a letter from Peter and Anna. It was slipped under our door. I am sewing a new apron for my doll on her black sewing machine. My outstretched feet reach the pedal enough to allow me to push the pedal back and forth from heel to toe. Tante Gerda gave me a terrific striped *Puppen Lappen* – left over from a summer dress her client ordered, and I'm surrounded by scraps of fabric. "I was beginning to think that they would never write me," I tell Oma, as I rip the envelope at one end.

April 12, 1947

Dear Vivi,

Unfortunately, we are not reunited with our parents. The International Red Cross contacted us at Helmut's house and promised to help. They

told us not to be impatient. Even though there is no information so far, that doesn't mean much, they said. Things are still very chaotic, although the war has been over for two years. Tracing missing persons takes a while. The Red Cross has reunited thousands of families. But we are very disappointed. We hoped for too much.

We are very happy for you that your father is alive. I am starting to study Italian history, and it must be a beautiful country. It is very old. We are impressed that you've tasted an orange and a banana. One day we will eat that, too.

School is going well. I want to become a doctor so I can heal others. Anna hasn't decided yet. Maybe she'll be a hairdresser because she likes to comb her hair a lot. But I am already 11 and have to think of the future, Helmut said. An organization that helps Jewish displaced persons has offered to help us immigrate to another country. Palestine needs young people to help build the state, or maybe we'll even go to America. We are thinking about it. We don't think that we'll stay with Helmut forever. We are not at home here; we are always looking for something else. We feel lost, although they are nice to us. This past winter was awful, the coldest in many years. We even got our food ration cards upgraded. People went to the forest and cut down trees for firewood because of the coal shortage. I read that Berlin had a lot of trouble because of the cold winter. You've got a terrible flu epidemic, and many factories closed for lack of heating. Even the government worked only half-

days. Were you cold? Anyway, I like to read the daily paper; often there are ads for families looking for each other. Our town got CARE packages from America: tins of fruit, meat and even canned potatoes. It tasted good.

I hope school is going well for you. You wrote that you think you'll get to skip a grade at the end of this year. That would be nice for you. Anna wants me to write that she has grown two inches since you last saw her, and her hair is still long. I've grown three and am much slimmer than at camp. In answer to your question, no, we've heard nothing about Martha. You are the only one with whom we correspond. Have you eaten any mushrooms? Just kidding. Wish we could see you. Write us soon,

Peter and Anna

I read Peter's meticulously neat letter once more. It's just like he is, polished and mature. My handwriting looks like a chicken's scratching by comparison.

I was reluctant to write them my good news about Papa. True, I've found him, but I've also lost him to Italy. So I didn't feel that I was bragging about him. Our summer days seem so long ago. I've not eaten mushrooms since. It's already spring. This year we are not invited to camp. I put the letter down and show it to Oma. Her fingers are pressing against her temples.

"Another headache?" I ask.

"It's nothing," she says, dropping her hands and taking the letter from me. A frown scores her brow as she reads.

"Those poor children. How sad," she shakes her head in sympathy. I tell her that I wonder most about Martha. I wish I knew how and where she is.

Then suddenly I get scared. I don't know why. I don't know why I am afraid just at that particular moment. But all at once I feel short of breath and shaky. I get up and hug Oma. A deep ache -- not only for them but also for me -- is in my throat. What if I didn't have my Oma?

"I am very lucky to have you. I love you Omi," I say. She kisses me and says she loves me too.

"Be careful with that sewing machine," she says, while my feet pump the wide pedal. "Keep your fingers away from the needle so they don't get punctured like mine." She waves her index finger in the air, showing me once more the black mark in the center of her nail.

Ali comes on Wednesdays, his day off. During one visit, he and Sonja take me out for a bicycle lesson on her bike. He tells me that working at Mutti's English club isn't too bad. "It's a lot better then working with the *Trümmerfrauen*," he says. "They worked me too hard. 'Ali lift this, pick up that,' even though they're much stronger than I am. We had no tools, just buckets and shovels. All the usable bricks got cleaned of mortar and will be used again. The others will be used as landfill. Our boss Frau Siegling said that it will take 25 years to clean Berlin of all the rubble. But it did build up my muscles. Look at these!" He flexes his impressive hard arm for me.

"What do you do now?" I want to know.

"I am a cook's apprentice. I wear a large white hat and a white kitchen shirt with the club logo on it," he says proudly. "Whenever the cook has his back turned, I pop food in my mouth, which we are not allowed to do, but everyone does it anyway."

I ask him into my room to show him the Italian newspaper that was crumpled in my package from Papa. I ironed it, and sometimes I take it out and look at it. I try to guess from a picture what the story might be about. I think Ali is impressed, but he doesn't comment. He expresses disappointment that Papa hasn't written him.

"After all," he says. "I spent more time with him than you did, about eight years more.... Plus he adopted me." He looks into the mirror on the wall and furiously brushes his dampened cowlick flat. "We played football and had fun together. He's the only father I've ever known. He took me to his matches. I was even an honorary member of the "Ert Football *Mannschaft*." (Ert Football Team.)

"Who was in his football *Mannschaft*? I ask.

"Herbert Ert. Achim Ert. Hannah Ert always came to watch. Only Erts belonged," he says. "I still have a group picture that I'll show you sometime, if I can find it. Maybe I threw it out."

I feel bad that Ali's feelings are hurt by Papa, and decide that I won't talk to him about Papa often, since the subject upsets him.

"Do you want to see my *Käfer* (bug) collection," I ask?

" Maybe next time."

May is the month to collect *Mai Käfer*. (May Bugs.) Lotte, Astrid and I each have a small cardboard box. I puncture mine with air holes, and line it with the bug's favorite food, shiny young Linden tree leaves. Our school has several tall chestnut trees that survived the tree-cutting winter of '45. It is home to many bugs. The *Käfer* are shiny brown insects that survive about five weeks. I am not afraid of them; they are not scary. After I finish my homework, the girls and I meet on the street with our boxes to compare insects. Grown-ups consider them pests, but we look forward to them in May and show them to the "queens."

The most interesting people for us girls are Sonja Smielus and her girlfriend Marta Bögler. They are 18 years old, and we have appointed them as "queens" of the block. I often have inside information because Ali is crazy about Sonja. She and Marta both have a lot of curly sand-colored hair and blue eyes with small pug noses. I consider Sonja prettier than Marta. She's very nice to me. Ali and she take me ice skating and bike riding; and when I am with the other girls, she sometimes gives me extra attention.

I know in advance where Sonja will vacation, what she did over the weekend and that she is letting her hair grow long. But, my most important news is that Sonja let Ali kiss her. It happened on Sonja's birthday. They went to the movie on *Prenzlauer Alee*. Ali slipped his arm over her shoulder and Sonja let him kiss her. It was the first kiss for both of them. He can't wait to kiss her again. I heard him

tell his buddy about it when they had a sandwich in our kitchen. I share this only with Lotte and swear her to secrecy. Ali would be very angry if he knew.

The girls spend the afternoon chatting on Sonja's balcony -- their throne, where they hold court, painting their nails or reading magazines. We, their subjects, are on the sidewalk, looking up, and vying with each other to say something interesting enough to win a morsel of their attention, and hopefully, a response. We copy whatever can be imitated, like their hair styles, ribbon colors or mannerisms. We like the way Sonja pushes her hair off her face, and lately, she has been wearing sunglasses. I can't get a pair, but wish I could.

When my school year ends, I am told that I may skip the next grade year and join the other eight-year-old children. I can't wait to tell Lotte. She tells me that the teacher I will have is very nice. Since she doesn't know that I am Jewish -- or maybe because she does know -- she tells me that Frau Potter taught the class that one reason why Jews were hated during the war is because they hoarded money and took jobs that belonged to real Germans. I can tell that Lotte is not elated that I will join her class next year. She already has her circle of school friends, and I feel that she considers me a "convenient" neighborhood friend. I try to overcome my injured feelings and look forward to our festival.

In June, our house puts on a "*Kinderfest*." (children's festival.) If enough children reside in a house, it qualifies for a fest. I make inviting signs, promising the

best feats ever. We decorate the courtyard with colorful balloons and paper ribbons. For weeks I've practiced the moves that Lene Schultz first taught me. In school, I've perfected cartwheels, splits and back bends, in my favorite class, gymnastics. The highlight of my performance is executing a back bend, and in that position, walking the width of the courtyard on all fours. The Bauer girls are singing a group song in harmony, and Ingrid, the shoemaker's daughter, is performing a dance routine her mother taught her. Norbert, the only boy performer, does magic tricks. Oma taught me a song for Tante Gerda's wedding which I perform for our fest, using my arms and eyes to simulate a doll.

Schauen Sie mich bitte ganz genau mal an.

Ich bin hergestellt aus Meisner Porcelan.

Wer mich kaufen will, der muss verstehen,

Wie mit Meisner Porcelan Puppen umzugehen.

Examine me please very carefully.

I am made from Meisner porcelain.

Whoever wants to purchase me

Must understand how to treat Meisner porcelain dolls.

The audience, which consists of house occupants and grandparents, plus anyone else enticed by our advertisement, is generous with applause. We charge 1 phennig

(penny) a person to cover decoration costs and keep the rest to spend at other house festivals.

Most of July and half of August are spent vacationing in Ferch.

On a clear mild day at the beginning of July, we take the train to the last station, Potsdam. At the dock, advertising "*Schwilow See*" (Schwilow Lake) I watch as the old ladies and men climb aboard a large ferry, carrying homemade cloth shopping bags filled with fruit and vegetables. Next we board the ferry. As soon as my feet touch the deck, I decide that I don't like it. The unsteady feeling of almost falling one way, then another, is not for me. There are lots of clanging sounds, and many swinging lanterns which hang from the roof and railings. They sway as if pushed by gusts of wind. This unsettles me. We sit on a bench facing the front. Hampers of food and belongings crowd the planks.

The lake is alive with boats: rowboats, sailboats, fishing boats and another ferry. Everyone waves a greeting to folks on the river bank, the sister ferry and the sailboats. Odd, I think, in trains and streetcars no one waves. I am relieved when the boat stops in the small village of Ferch. The hour-and-a-half trip is over. We walk uphill, carrying our bags to the inn.

The house we stay in is a working farm and inn. It is adorned with many gabled roofs -- two stories high -- all connected by a wide wooden staircase. Family photographs are on all the walls: spooky, stern-looking faces, unbroken by a smile. Two long walnut dining tables with long benches stand in the cool tavern room,

which always smells of stale beer and furniture wax. There are stone columns in odd places. Oma and I share a room with fresh field flowers and puffy feather beds.

"I'm glad it's raining," I say as I stand at the corner washstand scrubbing my face with a sponge moistened with cold water.

Oma stares at the rain drops through a small leaded window, and says, "Fishing is better in the rain; the fish bite better."

After breakfast, we hike to a small private pier at the point where the ferry turns. The lake ends in a mass of cattails and sea grass -- home to noisy frogs, crickets and mysterious birds. I fill our bucket with worms, and bait the hook of our casting rod. We catch harmless bass, flat silver fish, and a rare, long, narrow, sharp-toothed *Hecht*. (pike.) I am afraid and am happiest holding the rod with the red cork safely bobbing above water. I imagine that if a *Hecht* is at the other end, he might pull me into the water and eat me. So I never fish alone. But, I reason, if an adult is with me, they could hold onto me if the big fish bites my lure. Today, the lake looks quiet. The hazy surface is invaded only by drops of rain. Oma's yellow cork is bouncing, and soon she reels in a striped floppy fish. Two others follow.

When the shower stops, dragonflies appear -- long needles with transparent wings. Before long, hungry mosquitoes join them and us. Oma is furiously fanning and slapping herself. The air feels muggy. As we start for home, we pass flies feasting on yesterday's puddle of silvery fish scales. Oma pours water over the banquet.

We deliver our day's catch to the innkeeper. He smokes our booty along with

long black eels and other fish.

In the afternoon, Oma takes me mushroom picking. "See," she says. "Fishing and mushroom picking are best during or after rain."

I love the quiet peace of the woods, the dank smell after rain, and the misty ground. Sunlight filters through the tall trees in spots. I stir pine needles and fallen leaves, searching for hidden mushrooms. It reminds me of my last mushroom outing with Anna and Peter. I've written them, but haven't received an answer yet. I hope that they are finally with their parents or maybe they've gone to America. I don't even know what the name means. I guess it's a strange country like Italy, where another language is spoken. I am glad I don't have to go anywhere; it must be very scary to leave everything familiar.

I use only my hands to carefully brush away leaves and pine needles. My basket fills with honey-colored *Pfefferlinge*. (chanterelles.) Washed and cooked, they are my favorite. But I am not even tempted to taste them raw. Our outing ends when it starts to rain again.

We pick fruit from trees, berries from bushes, take long walks and have a wonderful vacation. During the month, Mutti, Ali, and Tante Gerda visit us on various weekends.

One day, the man who collects septic tanks from the neighboring farms invites me along for the ride. Oma lets me go. I enjoy sitting high up on a bench; the world looks different from that height.

"You're not a country girl until you can handle the team," he says. "Pull the

right side and they turn right, left is the same. Whoa! Not that sharply. They respond to a gentle tug. My Fritz and Fritzzy are smart; I can probably nap while they do the job," he chuckles.

Tall trees form a tunnel over the back road. We pass an open field and see three Russian soldiers kicking two tethered horses. "*Rabotta, Rabotta*," ("work, work") they are shouting, as if horses can understand Russian. The driver translates for me. The sight is very depressing and makes us both feel sad. At the next farm I ask for two carrots to give to Fritzzy and Fritz.

Upon our return to the city, a special envelope with red and blue stripes awaits me. I tear the letter open, careful to preserve the stamp. The letter is not very long. Papa writes me that he has good news. My baby sister was born on August nine. Her name is Gabriella. "We call her Gaby," he writes, and she has lots of black hair.

I am astonished. I did not know that they were expecting a baby. I picture how Frau Schultz looked when she was expecting a baby. I am not ready for a sister. I feel like saying, "Wait. Let me get prepared." But how would I get ready to be a sister to a baby in Italy?

I would love to see Papa, be his baby, have him hold me. Now he has a new baby and holds my baby sister. I've never been around babies. I don't know how to feel. Guilty? Sad? Happy?

Papa also writes me that he has a special doll waiting for me. Her name is

"Luciana." She is Italian, with long black hair, moving eyes and moving limbs. She is dressed in a red-and-black native Italian costume. Otherwise, all is well. They have a small apartment in Milan, gotten with the help of their new friends. They still go to Azzano on week-ends. Azzano is a village along Lake Como where they had been renting a house, because there is a housing shortage in the city. It is an hour by train to the city, and Papa makes the trip twice a day; but as soon as the apartment is ready, he will live in the city. He's working hard and has a real job now.

I wonder what his real job is.

He misses me, Mia is feeling well and sends me her love, as does Papa with a paper kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LIFE WITH OMA

"You will be astonished," Oma says, as we go downstairs a few minutes before midnight. "You know how quiet and orderly our street normally is, but tonight everyone will celebrate the first new year without war." My mind is still on the meal we just ate. Tante Gerda and Rudi joined us for dinner. When the platter of steaming chicken was passed around, I thought it rude of Rudi to help himself, first, to the plumpest leg joint. Only after heaping prune-stuffed dumplings and gravy onto his plate, did he pass the food to Tante Gerda.

"I am thinking of selling fabrics," Rudi announced. "People need new clothing and that calls for material. My father had a fabric store, and I like the idea of following in his footsteps."

He turned to Tante Gerda and said with much authority, "I know that I can count on you as a steady customer."

"Of course, Rudichen," Tante Gerda answered, nodding her head.

To us, he said that a seamstress like Tante Gerda must make customers look better than they really do. "If you are polite and always try to please your customer you will always have a busy workshop," he added.

I think he meant that if Tante Gerda loses a customer, it must be her fault. Oma and Grandfather grimaced at each other, united in their opinion. Opa then made a special toast to our loved ones who aren't with us, and to peace. I liked the sparkling drink, but even more, the long-stemmed glass. Opa said he would stay to drink one more *Schnapps* in the apartment. I heard a clock clang, and Oma said, "it's time to go."

Noise greets us as crowds of people cover the street. Strangers with laughing red faces and loud voices exchange toasts with filled glasses. Shrieks of alcohol released laughter echo, loud horns squeal, and everybody looks expectantly at the sky, as if heaven will drop us a reward. Firecrackers explode, and people roar with laughter. I look up at hundreds of serene stars dancing for the smiling moon. The moon always watches me. I wonder if he really sees me. Midnight church bells declare that 1947 has begun. Muffled explosions come faster and faster. Streaks of white flames streak through the air. I shiver. It looks and sounds too much like an air raid. The street smells sharp of gunpowder and smoke.

"Come," Oma says, pointing to the sack filled with dishes. We join other well-wishers at the apartment door of the shoemaker's oldest daughter Hilda, who is getting married tomorrow. Oma always saves broken dishes for such an occasion. We, too, toss many old cups, plates and bowls against the door. The shattered dishes

are to bring them luck. All breakage is to be left behind them in their new life together.

I watch Oma's dark hair, pulled back and twisted on her neck. She's wearing a black dress covered by a crisp white apron decorated with a lace pocket. She sweeps around the stove and pokes the broom under the kitchen table. She sweeps and wipes, sweeps and wipes, while I watch her and wait for the right moment.

"Did the Jews kill Christ?" I ask, removing my winter coat and dropping my schoolbag on the kitchen table.

"Why do you ask such a question, child?"

"My teacher, Frau Potter, said it. And some of the kids agreed with her. Does she think that I am Jewish? I've never told her, have you?"

"There are subjects we do not talk about. Like religion ..." She stops wiping the sink and massages her hands before adding coal to the stove fire. She stares down at them.

"Yes, I know that very well," I say, "but ... did you?"

"No, of course not. I only met Frau Potter once on visiting day. She wore a silver *Ehrenkreuz der Deutschen Mutter*, (cross of honor for the German mother) that Hitler supporters earned for having babies. Does she still wear it?"

"I guess so. She does wear the same silver pin every day. I didn't know that it had a special meaning."

"Yes. yes. There was the bronze for four children. Frau Potter had to give birth

to six children for the silver, and the highest honor was the gold for eight or more. Every year on August 12, Hitler's mother's birthday was celebrated. Under the Nazis there were all kinds of pins people could earn. Girls were urged to join the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen* (Alliance of German Girls) and they, too, earned pins." Oma sits down with me at the kitchen table. "Then there was the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth) for boys. They wore the brown uniforms and were taught to be true to Hitler above their own parents." She bites her lip. "And, of course, to despise Jews." She sighs and squeezes her head between her palms.

"Can I go to another school?"

"Well, there is no other school in our district. Because you must go to school, be a good girl and don't get yourself into trouble. I thought you liked school?"

"I love to go to school. I just don't want to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious about religion. I feel myself blush whenever they start talking about church."

"Vivilein, the world will never change. You will always meet prejudice of one kind or another. Just think of it as a lesson to make you a stronger person. Now, how about a marmalade sandwich?"

"Yes, please. Klaus from my class said that his father told him that Hitler built many bridges. Did he?"

"How did Frau Potter answer him?"

"She said yes, he did, but the class should study harder to learn who built what."

One night in April we are walking home from a movie. Oma and I go to the "Berlino" movie on *Prenzlauer Alee*, where Ali had his first kiss. Oma's favorite pastime is going to a movie, particularly a love story. Opa never joins us. He says he's too old for make believe. I watch the ladies blink their curly long eye lashes and am impressed by the deep-burning looks handsome men give to the ladies. Soon my lids feel heavy. I will close my eyes for just a minute, I tell myself.

Oma wakes me when the lights come on, and everyone is standing up. "Omi, erzähle mir die Geschichte," (Granny, tell me the story) I plead. As we walk home along the silent streets, Oma tells the most wondrous tale about the princess visiting a rose-covered cottage.

On Sunday, Oma sets my hair in long curlers, to make *Korkenzieher Locken* (corkscrew curls) also called "*Schillerlocken*" after the composer Schiller, who wore them. Long thin sausage curls surround my head, topped by a large white bow. The Bauer girls and I meet and compare our finery in the morning after they come back from church. I wish that Oma and I would go to church regularly. The girls always refer to something the pastor said, and I feel left out. Sometimes they ask why I didn't go, and I say that I went but we left early. Oma told me that church doesn't have any answers for us.

We don't jump rope on Sundays, as it might mess our curls. We play games instead. Hide and seek is everyone's first choice. We always end up in front of the

"Block Queens" balcony for new fashion ideas and approval. I call out to Sonja that I'm going to see Ali this afternoon, because Mutti has invited me to visit for an overnight.

After lunch, Oma and I depart. It is a windless fall day, almost balmy for late October. I am a little nervous about today, as Mutti has said that I am to return to Oma's house on my own tomorrow morning.

We board a streetcar a few blocks from our house, and I complain that I can't wear my gold earrings, because my lobes get infected within hours every time I insert them.

"I guess your ears don't like being pierced," she says, surprisingly unsympathetic.

The *Schaffner* (conductor) balances through the rocking aisle to collect money for tickets. I hand him a bill, and he clicks the silver change-maker hanging from his neck three times. Grandmother says I can keep the coins he gives me, and drop them into the blue-beaded purse Papa bought me. I complain about the loose latch, which has never functioned well. Oma promises that tomorrow she'll tighten it for me. Fifteen minutes later, the streetcar rumbles to a stop in the vicinity of the *U Bahn* stop, and we walk to the station. After a long wait, we board the train to *Charlottenburg*. The metro is above ground, and the view exposes the wasteland of Russian-occupied East Berlin.

From up here the streets look so desolate and empty.

"Where are all the people ?" I ask Oma.

"I don't know," she shrugs. "Working, most probably. And I suppose there's no reason for those who are not working to be outside. It's always safer to stay in one's house."

"Well, the streets look dismal, so unfriendly. It makes me sad." I say. A distinct difference is visible once the train enters the western sector. Reconstruction and clean up is in progress on every block. Produce store windows are filled with fruits and vegetables. People walk dogs and stop on the streets to chat with one another. Our train crosses a bridge, and I watch a group of women eating their lunch and resting along a lakeside wall. Oma points to the large sign with a painted German flag announcing that we are leaving the Russian sector and entering the British sector. She says that I might see more such signs because Berlin is also occupied by the French and the Americans. I've never seen any foreigners other than the Russians, and I am less afraid of them since they stopped raping and plundering. I wonder what the other Allies did when they came into Berlin. I know they all hated Germans, but my family did not trust Germans either. At last, we arrive at our stop. As we walk to Mutti's house I stop in front of a dress shop called "Barbara." The yellow sweater and orange skirt with matching yellow flowers in the window catch my eye. Cheerful colors, which I never see in Berlin's East sector, fill the shop windows. Back home I only see drab colors, like gray, navy and black.

We arrive at 21, *Mommsen Strasse*, walk across the courtyard, climb one flight and ring the bell. Dogs bark.

"Coming, coming," Mutti calls, and a moment later we step inside. Two eager dogs greet me. Pitti, the welsh terrier, is energetic and jumps up to kiss my nose.

Susie, a sluggish black Scottie, wags her tail slowly.

In the dim light of the corridor mother looks well in her white blouse and tight black skirt -- so different from Oma, who always wears loose full dresses that hide her figure. Mutti kneels and hugs me tightly. She rubs the lipstick from my cheek, and we look at each other. I think she looks tired, although her eyes crinkle when she smiles. She leads us down a long corridor past the kitchen, bathroom and one small bedroom into her living room. Oma sinks into a gray chair, while Mutti sits in a matching chair. I climb on the black and gray print sofa with the dogs, who jump up to give me more kisses. Noticing Mutti's disapproving glance, I play on the floor with the puppies; I love their puppy smell.

Mutti offers Oma one of her American Chesterfield cigarettes. I can tell that Oma is impressed. "On the black market you can get anything you want, it just takes money and connections," mother explains.

"Where do you sleep?" I ask. "Do you sleep with Ali in the small room?"

"No" she says. "The extra bed is for you. I sleep on the sofa. It pulls out and is large enough for two people. I'll show you tonight, when I open it for myself."

"What are you reading?" Oma examines the two books on the end table. "Can you read two books at the same time?"

Mutti gets up and puts ear drops in Susie's ear, saying, "I hope this dog isn't going to have a chronic ear problem; she's always shaking her head."

"You've cried too much," Oma says, looking at her critically. "The skin around your eyes is lined beyond your years. You know crying doesn't solve anything."

"Oh, mother, nothing escapes you. You are right, and I'm going to do something about it. I've met someone at work. He's younger than I am. Now don't give me that look," she says, before Oma can comment. "There aren't any men in Berlin for me. They are dead or too old, or probably former Nazis. I can't trust anyone." With both hands she pulls skin away from her eyes. "In every man I look for the Nazi who lives below the surface."

"How much younger?" Oma wants to know.

"He's 24." Oma looks startled by her answer. Susie waddles back to me.

"Oh, Elli, it can't work. He's four years older than your son. He's going to make you unhappy."

"I'm used to being unhappy." Mutti is silent, looking thoughtful. Pitti gets up, arches her back and sits down again, next to Mutti's chair. Her hand plays with Pitti's brown ear tip.

"What do you mean that you're going to do something about it?" Oma asks, leaning forward in her chair.

"There's a doctor I've heard about, who performs miracles."

"I don't understand," says Oma. I am listening with great interest. I don't understand either; but if I ask a question, I'll get sent out of the room, so I continue to pet Susie, without drawing attention to myself.

"He's called a plastic surgeon. He can make me look young again. I am saving my money for a big operation. My forehead will be lifted like this," she pulls the wrinkled skin up. "The doctor makes an incision here," she points to an inch beyond her hair, "and takes out the excess. And then he snips my eye skin -- top and

bottom – snip, snip.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Oma’s voice trails off.

“You think I’m ...” Mutti motions her index finger in a circle.

“Of course I don’t think you’re crazy. I guess you’re right. Look as well as you can.... That way if he stays, you’ll be glad you made the effort. If he doesn’t, you’ll look so good anyway, you’ll have no trouble getting any other man. That’s the modern way.”

“I don’t want any other man.”

“Of course,” Oma agrees. “That’s always the problem, isn’t it?”

“Well yes, but the matter is settled. I am saving my money for the operation. I did cry too much, and at 42, I can’t open my eyes in the morning, because the upper eye skin covers my eyes totally.” She looks at Oma, removes the ashtray from the shiny black cocktail table and places it on the console, before she steps over to a small framed print and straightens it. Then she glances at her watch.

“It’s almost four o’clock,” Mutti says. “I’d better start our coffee.” When she leaves the room, Oma’s eyes glance her way sadly. We follow her along the corridor to the kitchen, which is smaller than ours at home but large enough for a kitchen table and four chairs.

Oma busies herself, setting cups and saucers on the table. Mutti produces treats for us: real coffee for Oma purchased on the black market and hot chocolate for me. The grandest treat for us is cake – a gooey cream cake. When the last crumb is gone, I offer to take Pitti and Susie for a walk. On the street, I wait for them to sniff out the proper spot in the grass.

When I come back, Mutti repeats that I am to return to Oma by myself the next morning. "I want her to grow up independent, not sheltered like I was. She's nine years old, that's old enough."

Oma doesn't argue too long; she's afraid that Mutti will insist I leave Oma and move back to her. This is a threat Mutti uses when Oma complains about me. "She can always move in with me, mother, if she's too much for you," she says. Silence is Oma's response.

As I turn to kiss Oma good-bye, she winks at me. "See you tomorrow," she says. "I want to be home before dark." It strikes a chord of well-being deep within me. She's with me even when she's not.

As part of my homework, I have to practice penmanship because mine is very bad. I write the alphabet over and over, while Mutti makes a phone call.

"Yes Franz, I do," she says with a girlish giggle when she hangs up.

After I help water the plants on the balcony, Mutti decides that it's time to bread our single dinner cutlet.

"It's hard work being a waitress," she says, as she drops a large *Schnitzel* into the frying pan. She salts the potatoes, which are boiling in one of the pots that we uncovered from the rubble after we were bombed out of *Bach Strasse 3*. "I used to work for a big film company. It was a job with responsibility," she reminisces. "I wore tailored dresses, but Hitler and the war changed all that. Now I am lucky I have work of any kind."

"Do you speak English to the officers you serve food to?" I ask, careful not to cut my fingers while peeling cucumbers.

"They laugh at my English all the time," she chuckles, "but I don't mind. It's good-natured laughter, and it creates a bigger tip."

"Are you embarrassed by tips?"

"Why no. Without tips, I couldn't afford to pay my rent. No, I'm not ashamed of receiving tips at all."

"Do you see Ali at work a lot? ... What should I do with these peeled cucumbers?"

"Give them to me. I've got the marinade in this glass bowl Yes, whenever I am in the kitchen, I see your brother plus another friend of ours, Franz."

Mutti and I walk the dogs after dinner. Before bed, I ask to take a bath. After flinging a handful of bath beads into the tub, she turns on the faucet. No fire has to be built first. I am to sleep in Ali's bedroom.

Ali comes home late, smelling of fried onions. My head is burrowed under the cover, but I wake up as he opens the window to let the night air in.

"How was your day?" I ask, sleepy but forcing myself awake for the chance to talk to him.

"No different from yesterday. It's a job," he says. "Not too good, not too bad." He empties his pockets of change, a crackling pack of cigarettes and something that rolls a short distance before it clatters to the floor. "There aren't many jobs available and there's not much I'm trained for," he yawns, sitting on the edge of his bed and removing shoes and socks.

"Can't you go to a school now to get trained?" I ask.

"No, not really. I have to earn money. I'm too old for school. Who would

support me? Mutti works hard just to support herself. I wouldn't ask any more of her." When he comes back from washing and brushing his teeth, he gives me an envelope. "I have a little note for Sonja; you can be my messenger. Now let's fall asleep. I am very tired."

"Here I am!" I shout. His shadow passes me. He doesn't see me. There are many babies in the room. They all cry to be picked up by him. I am one of them. Papa glides past me and fades away.

Mutti wakes me early. She works the morning shift, and I have to return to Oma. I dress silently not to wake my brother. I feast my eyes on him. He looks handsome even in his sleep; his hair is tousled and his mouth is slack. I love the intimate sound of his snoring. I blow him a kiss, as Papa did me, and quietly close the door.

Mutti heats yesterday's roll and pours a glass of milk for me. She kisses me when I leave. I don't think she's sorry that I am leaving, and I'm not either.

The morning sky is a hazy red. The air has a damp smell, as if it might rain. I shiver and turn right in the direction of the station.

Oma is sitting at the top of the stairs two houses away. Her hands are folded across her purse. She startles me as I walk by. "Good Morning, Vivi. Don't tell your mother," Oma smiles and descends to take me home.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FAREWELL

"January 1, 1948

Dear Vivi, Happy New Year.

"We've taken the biggest step of our life and immigrated to Israel. The organization 'Joint' will still reunite us if our parents are found, but our hope for a reunion isn't good. We are with other children who don't have parents. It helps us to know that we are not the only ones. Everyone is very friendly. Brotherhood is important here. We all help each other, and we are all equal. Kibbutz life is good. Even without our own family, we are treated like family here. We will work for a common cause, building Israel. The weather is much warmer than what we're used to, but I think we will love it. You probably have snow-covered streets, while we have warmth and sunshine -- good fruit-growing weather

" 'Gaash' is an agricultural Kibbutz. We will grow cotton, oranges, lemons and grapefruits as large as the sun. There are daily school lessons. Learning Hebrew, the official language, is quite hard; but that will be our new language, so we have to learn it. We don't need money here, because food, clothing and housing are provided. That's a good thing since we have no money. We sing many new songs at night when we all sit together after the day's work and school. I love it here and Anna and I can always stay together. We mailed

Helmut a box of mixed fruit. He understands why we had to come here. I don't know what excuse he gave his neighbors when we left town. I think he said we went away to a boarding school. Please write us soon; your letters mean a lot to us. Because of our situation, we don't have any friends who write us. Anna and I will join the army here one day.

"You could come, too; every Jew is welcome here. We are no longer the outcast minority here. We are *Sabras*. (natives.)

Shalom (peace) from your friends Peter and Anna

Lying on my bed after school I reflect about the different twist their lives have taken. I picture us in the meadow braiding flowers for our hair wreath. Anna was twisting brown curls through her fingers while Peter talked about their parents. I wonder what a grapefruit as large as the sun looks like. I wonder what a grapefruit is. Peter sounds so mature, as old as Ali. How long ago the summer of '45 was. My life hasn't changed that much, but theirs has. The framed group photo Hannelore sent me is on my dresser. They don't sound like the children I met. They sound wiser, compared to me; but they always did. I would like for everyone to be the same like they are in Israel, to not squirm when others talk about religion at school. Lotte is already talking about her confirmation when she turns 13. I would never leave my Oma. She'd be too sad without me. I still play with dolls. Well, not really, but I like to sew and knit clothes for them. Dressing and undressing them is not really playing. I would not like to learn a new language and leave everything, even to be

with Papa. Anyway, he has a baby daughter. I wish he'd send me my Italian doll, "Luciana," with long black hair and moving eyes. None of my dolls have hair or moving eyes. I wonder where Papa keeps her while she waits for me.

The next morning at breakfast, Opa invites Oma and me to a restaurant for an afternoon coffee.

"What's the occasion?" she asks, as Opa swings a scarf around his neck.

"I have to sweep snow away from the front of the store," he says. "I shouldn't have started the subject now."

"Well you've got to tell us more than that," she says with irritation.

"I am meeting with a man from whom I want to buy a *Laube*. (hut.) I've done a watch repair for him, and he tells me he's ready to sell. Since he lost his wife, he doesn't use it anymore.

"I did not know you are interested in a *Laube*. That's the first I've heard about it," she says. "Do you want another cup of coffee and talk about it?"

"What's a *Laube*?" I ask, as Opa unwraps the scarf and pulls his gloves off.

"I was going to tell you about it when it was a sure deal," he says, sitting down and taking a sip of the filled coffee cup. "In *Spandau*, there is a large plot of land. Individuals rent or buy little plots and farm it. We can grow flowers, tomatoes and string beans, or just sit and enjoy the fresh air. The *U Bahn* stop is just one block away. Fresh air, sunshine, and nice people as neighbors. It would be good for all of us. The *Laube* is fairly large; two bunk beds sleep four people, and there is a kerosene burner for warming food. Does this sound good to you two? What do you say, General?" He faces Oma for a reaction. She looks at my face as she collects the

coffee pot. I have a broad smile on my face. She is not giving any negative signals. I can hardly control my excitement. "When can we go and visit the *Laube*?" I ask.

"It will be great for us this summer," says Opa. "We can grow flowers or vegetables, and it will give us all a chance to get out of the city." His scarf and gloves are on. "No Ferch this summer then," he says as he leaves. "That's the trade off." I nod my head in full agreement. I don't like fishing anyway. All morning I babble about what we will do. I ask if Lotte can come with us, what kind of flowers we will grow. Oma rests her head on her arms at the kitchen table, and I realize I'd better stop. I am wearing her out.

"You can help me water the plants," says Oma after lunch. I fetch my short watering can from the balcony and fill it with water. She hums under her breath, as she waters the rubber tree. Only Oma handles it because it is very temperamental and loves to drop its leaves in protest. I can water the spider plant. Oma snips off shoots, plants them, and brings them to friends. We brought one to the Schultzs recently. Little Heinz can walk and talk, and he acts like a little boy, not a baby.

"He's big for a two-year-old," Frau Schultz said, as she stuffed another morsel of liverwurst in his mouth. I played with him a lot. He's six month older than the sister I haven't seen. He didn't want to be cuddled by me, only by his Mommy. It made me sad. I'd like to cuddle baby Gaby. I miss her. I miss Papa. I miss a family. I go over to Oma and sit on her lap. At 10, I'm really a little too big for lap sitting, but she doesn't shoo me off. "You're my family," I tell her and kiss her cheek. On the street the other day, Oma showed me a baby girl and said. "That's the size that Gaby is approximately at one-and-a-half-years-old."

After all the plants are soaked, we go downstairs. Occasional snowflakes flutter around us as we walk to the restaurant. Opa introduces us to the smiling Herr Maurer. His round red face looks polished. He's telling Opa about his "dear departed wife" and that without her he no longer uses the *Laube*. Oma drinks her coffee with sugar and cream and orders a cream eclair for both of us. The conversation is about land, vegetables, the communal water supply etc. I enjoy my eclair topped with *Schlagsahne*, (whipped cream) and daydream about the huge flowers we will grow and how I will enjoy picking red tomatoes off our plants.

Finally, they shake hands, and Opa, with great ceremony says, "On this day, January 8, 1948, we are the proud owners of a *Laube* in Spandau. We stand up for the occasion. Oma also shakes Herr Maurer's hand, and says, "It's time for us to go. Opa stays behind to have a *Schnapps* with Herr Maurer.

The snow-covered street looks like a huge white tablecloth. The ground is slippery. Oma supports herself on my shoulder. We stop a couple of times so she can catch her breath. The wind blows snow in our face. Climbing the staircase, Oma grips the handrail; her breath is labored. On the second floor, in front of the Bauer girl's door, she whispers, "*Ich kann nicht mehr.*" ("I can't go on.") I ring the doorbell and Frau Bauer lets us in.

"My Oma doesn't feel well and has to sit down. May we come in?"

"Of course," she says. "Come in. I'll get you a glass of water." Oma signals with her hand that she does not want water. We help her to a chair. In the dim hallway, she slowly sinks onto the seat, supporting herself with one hand on the hall chest. I crouch on the floor under her so I can look into her face. Her eyes find

mine.

"Vivichen, Deine Oma stirbt," (Vivi your Oma is dying) she says, holding her right palm against her heart.

"No, please no," I shriek. "I will get a doctor. " I stand up and look at at my dear Oma's face. It's so dark. I don't know if it's lack of light or tears that makes my eyes swim. I take her hand, but it feels slack. She doesn't squeeze mine back. Her hands drop, and she sinks back. Dark hollows have replaced her lively brown eyes.

"Please watch her," I tell Frau Bauer, sick with fear. "I will run to the doctor's house." The street is very slippery with fresh thick snow. A terrible sense of dread sweeps over me as I run many blocks. Finally, I'm in front of the doctor's house. The door is locked. I don't which apartment is his.

"Herr Doctor, Herr Doctor," I shout, running back and forth in front of the house. *"Herr Doctor, bitte kommen Sie. Meine Oma ist sehr krank."* (Mr. Doctor, please come. My Oma is very sick.)

A window opens, and a man asks who I am. I tell him, and he says he'll be right down. My inside-cheeks are bleeding because I'm chewing them to keep from crying. She can't die I scream inside.

"You're covered with snow, child," the doctor says, switching his bag to his left hand and brushing me off.

"It doesn't matter. Please hurry," I say. "Do you know where we live?" I ask. Walking carefully on the snow-covered street, he says, "Yes, yes, I know."

"I'll run ahead, and tell Oma that you're coming," I say. The tears are freezing on my cheeks and lashes.

Frau Bauer's door is open. I hear Tante Gerda sob as I run up the stairs . Uncle Rudi is leaning against the foyer wall, massaging his cheek.

"I called them," explains Frau Bauer when I rush in. Oma is where I left her.

"Has she said anything?" I ask Frau Bauer, who shakes her head "no." A full glass of water is next to Oma.

The doctor is breathless when he finally arrives. He examines Oms and wants her moved to our upstairs apartment. A couple of neighbors help carry her to Tante Gerda's old bedroom.

"She suffered a massive stroke," he says, "and died instantly."

They want me to leave the room, but I can't go. The doctor sits on a chair and tells me that my Oma is dead, just as Opa arrives, slightly tipsy. The doctor turns to Opa and confirms what he just told me. Opa falls into a chair and sobs. I go to him and stroke his back, scared to see him cry.

We are each alone in our grief; I can't say anything to him.

Mutti and Ali arrive. There is no comfort in seeing them. My Oma is dead. Mutti is going to pieces.

"Sit up straight. Fix your hair. Brush your dress, it's dirty," she commands. She picks on me in her sorrow. I don't respond.

"I always knew that this was going to happen," she cries. "But it's too soon. This is the one thing I've always dreaded," she says, kneeling in front of Oma and talking to her.

A loud rasping gurgling sound comes from Oma. Startled I run to her side.

"Mutti," I say. "I am sure she moved a finger since you last looked. It's her

little finger. Please check."

Mutti dampens a sponge and wipes the mouth when Oma makes another hoarse noise. Everyone jumps up to stare at her. Rudi shakes his head and says that those are death noises. There is no hope.

"Don't let them bury her. Please wait," I tell Tante Gerda. "I think Oma wants to come back to me."

She cries. I turn to Ali, who waves me off. Opa cries. His total devastation confirms my fear. Our family is ruined.

I am desperate. I wander down the hall into the kitchen, realize I can't ask her anything and return to Oma's room. Again and again.

I refuse to leave her room all night. "I can't leave her alone," I sob, "She'll be lonely without me." They let me stay, too distraught to argue with me. "Tell me how to live without you?" I plead. "I'm not ready. I don't know what to do." I look for a sign. I hope that maybe she'll come back to me if she sees how much I miss her. "I will always be good," I promise her.

Her hands are cold and white. Her face is severe. She is gone.

A horse-drawn hearse comes in the morning. Men come and take her away in a narrow coffin. No one noticed the school picture I slipped under her hands. I am powerless to stop anything that follows.

Because the coach is full, I sit with the men on the top bench of the hearse. The streets are nearly deserted. White piles of snow are everywhere. The men open a large umbrella. I am glad it's snowing; it stings my face. The whole world should cry, "My Oma is dead."

During the church service, I don't hear what the pastor says. In my own world of memories I touch the smooth, round stones around my neck. Oma gave me this necklace. Many people are at the funeral. With kind worried faces they make a circle around me. They don't know what to say to me other than to place a hand on my head. I am lost without my Oma.

There are a lot of flowers, some white, others yellow. None are her favorite kind. Don't they know she liked blue cornflowers and white lilacs?

At the grave site I don't say good-bye, like the others. I know that she will always be with me.

The closed casket is edging toward a deep hole. I can see Opa kneel and place a bouquet of flowers on top of the casket as it is lowered from my view.

Now the funeral is over, and they are all turning from the grave.

I wear the last winter coat she sewed for me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LIFE WITHOUT OMA

"You paint the devil on the wall," says plump, kind-faced Aunt Alma, "and you worry about too many things." Aunt Alma with her tiny, gray pom pom curls has come to look after Opa and me.

My daily complaint is that I don't feel well and am probably very sick. On Friday, I announce that I am failing most classes and will be left behind. The following day, I tell her that Opa is not looking well and should see a doctor. My dolls know exactly how I feel, because they are the only ones I trust enough to confide in. I stare out of the window a lot on cloudy days. I don't like sunny days. Aunt Alma smiles and says that I am morose. I don't know what the word means and don't care enough to ask.

Everybody is busy. Tante Gerda buys two sewing machines and hires a young girl to help her sewing business grow in her apartment. Uncle Rudi opens a textile store and hires Sonja to help him run it. "She's a real asset," he says, "she always remembers customer's names." Opa goes to a tavern after work. When he comes home and takes me on his lap, he smells of *Schnapps*. "I drink to kill the pain," he says. Herr Maure has returned the *Laube* money because he knows of another interested family. "It's probably a real family," I think to myself, "with a father,

mother, children and grandparents.

June comes and school is over. I didn't fail.

Mutti comes to visit. She looks very stylish, with her blouse collar turned up. Her eyes are larger and bluer. Her forehead doesn't have deep creases anymore. She has lots of elaborate curls piled on top, which add to the elegant look.

"The time has come for you to live with me again in the West," she says, as she drops her handbag on the kitchen table. Suddenly my lips feel very dry.

"But I can't leave Opa," I say, "and you work all the time. I'll be all alone."

"I've made my decision. It is better this way. Ali and I will get you tomorrow. You've been with me before," she coaxes. "We got along well, don't you remember?"

I answer in my mind. "That was five years ago when I was five-years-old, and no, I don't remember it very well." But aloud I say nothing.

"Have you told Opa?" I ask.

A frown of impatience crosses her face. "Yes, he agrees with the decision. He'll miss you, but it's for the best. You can still visit him. You know how to go by yourself." She says she wants to go across the street to visit Tante Gerda. "Come with me," she says.

Reluctantly I agree to go.

After Mutti leaves, I go downstairs to Lotte's apartment. I'd like to hear how

much she will miss me, but she tugs at the end of her braid to form a curl and tell's me that I am lucky. "Oh, you're going over to the 'Golden West.' Lucky you," she says. My good bye is obviously more sorrowful than hers, because I don't feel lucky.

The following Tuesday, on their day off, Mutti and Ali come to collect my belongings. He looks taller to me, older. Early this morning, I went across the street to hug my aunt and uncle good bye. She was pinning a green dress to a stuffed dummy form. She wiped away tears and said that she will miss me a lot. After hugging her, my navy skirt was spotted with green thread and fabric bits. Rudi blew his nose and said he had to rush to the store because he expected a shipment.

I shake hands with Aunt Alma, who comes out of the kitchen, smiling and wiping her palms on her skirt. She's always happy. Even today. It irritates me. Last, I go into Opa's store. The sun is out, and the room is flooded in bright light. Oh, how I love this cramped little shop, filled to overflowing with clocks. Tinny rattling clinks come from the clocks. A white ticket hangs from each hook so customers won't get the wrong merchandise. I run my hands over the polished wood counter and feel sad. I don't know what to think about leaving. It isn't the same anymore without Oma. Aunt Alma tries, but I don't want to love her.

Opa says he understands. And adds, "Mother needs you."

I am not sure who needs me. I used to think that Mutti and Papa would get together after the war, but that wish can never be. I don't really know what to wish for now. Maybe Mutti and I will be close, loving. I need to feel close to someone.

As we ride the *U Bahn*, I don't want to show them that I'm crying. Mutti and

Ali are talking about the 300 *Mark* (dollars) it costs to buy a pound of butter.

"Our money is worthless" Mutti says. "It is ridiculous to pay 500 Marks for a couple of sausages."

I am interested in their conversation because I have accumulated 50 Marks. I earned the money from Opa for sweeping and dusting his store every week. This is a lot of money, I think; but according to Ali that will only purchase one loaf of bread.

"On Friday, the government is going to convert our money to a new currency, in order to differentiate it from the *Ostmark* (East Mark) says Mutti. I don't understand everything she is saying, but am concerned about the value of my 50 Marks.

When we get home an unfamiliar man's voice calls from the living room.

"In here, I got here a little early. I'm Franz," he says, rising from the couch when I enter, "your mother's friend."

"This is my special friend Franz. He's here a lot, and I hope you two become good friends," says Mutti.

"Hello," I say, trying not to look up.

Pitti runs around my legs, jumping up to meet my hand. Susie sits and wags her tail. They lick my face when I bend down to pet them. At least the dogs will be fun. I shake Franz's offered hand. He's very tall, and his brown suede shoes have a thick crepe sole. Ali greets him with familiarity. Franz's face is young; he looks like one of my brother's friends. When he turns away from me, I notice his straight black hair is very shiny. He must use the same type of hair gel tube Ali uses. His long arm

squeezes Mutti's waist. He whispers something she likes, because I hear her laugh. Ali brings my brown fake leather suitcase into his bedroom and places it on what is now my bed.

"Remember when we shared a bedroom at *Bach Strasse*?" He asks. I nod, "yes."

"Well," he says with a smile, "the same rules apply. You're 10 years old, but I'm still 11 years older than you, so don't touch my stuff. This is your chest and night table." He opens the closet and shoves his clothes to one side and hangs my clothes alongside. Almost everything I own was sewn by Oma.

"Would you please take the dogs out?" Mutti says. I gather the dog's leashes and take them out. Even after they've found their spot I linger, not anxious to get back. Unfortunately, Franz is still in the apartment, helping Mutti cook dinner.

"Can I help?" I ask. He turns around smiling. He's very handsome with soft brown eyes and broad shoulders. He's taller than anyone I know.

"You can help out by drying the dishes next to the sink," Mutti says. "Catch." She throws me the checkered dish towel with a giggle.

I don't think Franz realizes that I will watch everything he says and does from now on.

"I have a key necklace for you. Don't lose it or you will be locked out," Mutti says the next morning, as she places the red ribbon around my neck. She tells me to remove it only when I bathe. I'm not thrilled about wearing a cold key against my skin all the time.

After everyone leaves for work, I spend time investigating the apartment. Two thick books are on mother's end table. The tall lamp looks like a black shiny gold-trimmed vase. She sleeps on the couch, which opens into a bed. Franz's striped pajama and her silky pink nightgown are folded across a straight backed chair. Pitti and Susie are at my heels wherever I go. I finish unpacking my suitcase and fill my chest of drawers before I take the dogs out. No one my age is around, but the sunshine on my face feels good. When I return from our walk, a boy with big ears comes out of the house.

"Are you Frau Ert's daughter?" he asks, "my name is Dieter. I'm 11 and I live here." We talk about the dogs. Dieter tells me he's walked them for Mutti occasionally. "Come out later, and I'll introduce you around," he offers. Mutti has left me a shopping list and I take the dogs with me. At the corner kiosk I notice that "The Daily Mirror," has a bold headline, "This will start a Cold War." The newspaper says that the Russians will retaliate if the western allies create a new form of money. I walk on, wondering how a cold war is different from the war we had. The grocery store across the street has a nice display of vegetables. I ask for a bunch of kohlrabi, which Mutti will cook tomorrow morning for my evening meal. She told me that she eats in the club and that I will generally eat alone. A pair of sausages from the butcher and bread from the bakery complete my shopping. Just then I remember that Mutti wanted a piece of meat that I'm supposed to cook in lots of water when I get home. After the meat is soft, I'm to pour two cups of rice into the pot for the dogs meal. I've never cooked before but think that I can do it. I head

home.

Upstairs, Susie plops down on the cool kitchen floor, while I go through the same routine Oma followed every time we came home to an empty apartment. First I check under the beds. Next I open each closet and ruffle the clothes. Then I check out the balcony and look behind the bathroom door. I don't know who Oma was afraid of, but I have acquired the same habit. I am glad that Pitti follows every move I make. At night, the dogs and I cuddle together in my bed.

I wander through city streets. The houses are covered with mist. Off in the distance, I spot a familiar man's figure, wearing a long coat. He's bending over a box. I get closer and see that he is hovering over the container, as if he's tending a baby. The fog becomes denser, swirling around the figure. I wake up rubbing my eyes.

Was it Opa I saw or Papa? Even the next day I can't forget the dream. I wonder about it all day long.

On Friday morning we fill a suitcase with all of mother and Ali's money and join the long line at the bank. We get just a handful of bills in exchange for the full suitcase. Mother gives me one west mark in exchange for my 50.

Ali explains that the Western rejection of the Eastern currency infuriates the East German and Russian governments. According to radio and newspaper reports, West Berlin is blockaded because of the heightened tension. Within days, all land

routes into West Berlin are blocked by the Russians.

"We are an island within Germany," Ali says. "You can't use west mark in the East anymore. Even possession of west mark is now outlawed in the East."

It sounds very technical to me, and I don't understand what he's saying. I look at my single bill, for which I gave up 50.

Monday morning Frau Zudi, the new housekeeper, lets herself into the apartment. She looks at herself in the hall mirror. Her eyes are small and round like her face. She combs her short, brown, wind-blown hair. Around her neck she wears a gold chain with a cross on it, and she doesn't wear any makeup.

"*Guten Morgen*," (Good morning,) she says as she hangs her sweater on the back of the kitchen chair. "I will come every day for a couple of hours. Would you like to take the dogs out and get a couple of rolls for us from the bakery?"

It's a good thing that I like to walk the dogs, because it looks like I will be doing it daily. Sleepy Susie doesn't like to walk. She pulls back instead of forward like eager Pitti, whose shiny brown eyes are constantly full of fun. Pitti is never too tired to catch a ball or stick midair. I like her doggy smell when she kisses me and pushes her insistent, wet nose into my ear. At night she curls between my feet, keeping them warm. Susie is too lazy to jump up; her fat tummy competes with her stubby legs for space.

My sack from the bakery smells of fresh bread and cinnamon buns. My stomach growls as Susie drags and Pitti pulls me home. While Frau Zudi and I eat our breakfast, she tells me that she has a married daughter, who is expecting a baby

in the late fall. "Do you like your son-in-law?" I ask. I'd like to ask her about Franz, but she's too new in our house and hasn't met him.

Frau Zudi helps me hang an embroidery sampler that I stitched in school at the foot of my bed. A picture of Oma and the last photo I have of Papa, Zito and me are on my dresser. Frau Zudi changes Ali's bed linen while I stand on my toes to examine myself in the mirror over his dresser. I wish I were taller. I'm always right next to the smallest girl in the class. The only time I was tall was in my first grade, when I was a year older than the others.

I brush my hair. It's much longer than in the yellowed photo with Papa. I have wavy light brown hair and brown eyes. I've always wished they were blue like Mutti's and Ali's. I'd feel much prettier with blue eyes. Mutti says I look just like my father, but I don't see the resemblance. It's been four years since I last saw him. The visits were very short. I now realize how dangerous it was for him to come to us. I don't remember ever living with him or seeing him every day. We just had short visits. I remember two meetings quite clearly, but the other memories are vague. Now it's my Oma I miss the most. I talk to her daily in my thoughts and ask her for advice. Sometimes I try to guess what her answers would be.

Near the end of July in '48, Mutti comes home with two grocery bags filled with boxes and tin cans.

"That's heavy," she says, as she sets the bags on the kitchen table. A yellow-and-white box drops out of the bag onto the floor.

"There go a dozen eggs," she says. I check the floor and am amazed that the eggs aren't leaking out of the box. She laughs at my reaction and unpacks a striped white-and-red box. She says it contains our next two-week supply of potatoes. I help pack away a powdered milk box, tins of string beans, carrots and canned potatoes, an oval shaped can of ham, as well as, cans of spam and corned beef. I tell Mutti that I've never heard of meat in a can. She says it can be eaten right out of the can; no cooking is needed. "We got this food by airlift," Mutti says. My face shows zero comprehension. She explains that the food is all flown in, because land and sea routes into Berlin are blocked by the Russians.

"This is American food," she says. "Americans eat this also." I am surprised that Americans eat so much powder. On Sunday morning, while Mutti scrambles the egg powder for breakfast, she says, "Berliners are very grateful to America for providing the airlift. Without the Allies help, we would starve." I don't mind the taste, but prefer an egg with a yolk in the center.

"Let's visit the zoo," she says after breakfast. "Just the two of us." I hurry to get dressed, selecting a short-sleeved navy cotton dress with a white lace collar. Once outside the house I feel great. The weather is perfect, with clear blue sky, white drifting clouds and bright sunshine. I take a deep breath and think that maybe it won't be so bad living with Mutti.

We walk along *Kurfürstendam*, the most fashionable street in Berlin. Crowds of window shoppers and strolling couples fill the broad sidewalk. I see beautiful clothes galore -- on people strolling and in windows. I love the bright colors. In one

store front window -- barefoot Ladies walk around the window, clad in stockings of different shades -- dark brown, light gray, nude, black, even sheer red. Only the legs are visible. A lowered shade hides everything else. I make Mutti spend a lot of time in front of this window.

We pass a red, green and white-striped stand advertising, "authentic Italian ice." Mutti offers me an "Italian ice." I am surprised that she doesn't object to the name. Generally Italian means my father and is unpopular with her. The mustached vendor fills paper cups with crushed clear ice and pours colored syrup over it. We both choose the red flavor. I wonder if Papa eats this ice, too, and if Gaby likes it. She will be two-years-old in August. I eat mine too quickly. The cold ice hurts my head.

I ask Mutti if she's ever home for an evening.

"Rarely," she says. "I usually work the dinner shift. It pays better money, but the hours are long. Franz will be home some evenings, but Ali will also continue night work. In the mornings you will have to be very quiet." She takes my hand as we cross a street. "That's why you need a key around your neck," she says. "My work is quite a distance from our house if you were to lock yourself out."

The zoo is jammed with people, mostly women and children. There are a few men but not many. I wedge myself between elbows and press against the iron railing that separates me from the huge, open hippopotamus mouth. I stare into the opening and imagine it could swallow me without even chewing. I wonder, "Would he spit my shoes out?" We visit the busy monkey house. Then we admire

long, white, elephant trunks. After spending two hours at the zoo, we walk along the street. A familiar high-pitched roar fills the street, and I wince in fear. For a moment I stare into the clear sky, mesmerized, expecting the giant shadow of an airplane to zoom above me. Mutti grabs my hand and pulls. "Come on, it's only an ambulance siren," she says, "but it sounds sinister doesn't it?" Mutti stops before a building that she says is a Hebrew school.

"You should learn about the Jewish religion," she says. "I don't know enough to explain it to you."

"Do you like the Jewish religion?" I ask.

"I believe that everyone should have the right to follow whatever religion they believe in," she answers, "though personally I am not a religious person. Religion does give great comfort to believers. Your father's parents were religious. They accepted me as their daughter. They were gentle, wonderful people. I loved them very much. Rudi's mother never accepted Tante Gerda you know. She always referred to her as a *shiksa*."

"What's that?" I ask.

"Oh, it's a Yiddish slang word for a gentile female."

"Do you feel Yiddish or Jewish?" I ask.

She looks at me out of the corner of her eye, "Yiddish is the word for a language. So, no, I don't feel Yiddish, but, yes, in my heart I feel Jewish. But don't ask me why," she grimaces, rolling her eyes. "I can't really explain it even to myself."

Dodging in and out between the other pedestrians, she asks, "Do you feel Jewish?"

"No," I say. "I don't really know what Jewish is."

"That's why I want you to go to Hebrew school; that's exactly why," she says, and points to a crumbling house with frilly metal balconies and fish-scale shingles. I guess I will go to the school.

I don't know how I feel about religion. I am afraid of it. I feel squirmy when the teacher refers to church. She never refers to the Jewish religion. I guess that no one is Jewish in my school. I don't know if I am more Lutheran than Jewish. With Oma, I was Lutheran, and I guess Mutti wants me to be Jewish, although I don't know why.

When we get home, Dieter is in front of the house with his best friend Boris, who bikes over daily from the next block. I introduce Mutti to blond Hedda and her girlfriend Karin. Both live across the street from us. They are outside a lot, and I am thrilled that they include me when they play hide and seek and share secrets. Mutti says that I am to go into the house at eight o'clock sharp, no later. Because it's still warm, everyone else stays out longer.

When she is at work, I don't feel like going in at eight. It's no fun being alone in the apartment all evening. It feels spooky. I am afraid of creaking floorboards and that a bad person might climb up on our balcony while I'm asleep. So I stay out with the others.

One Wednesday evening, I'm still outside at 9:45 when Mutti and Franz roar

home on his motorcycle. She climbs out of the sidecar. I sense trouble. I didn't expect them home so soon. She shouts at me and without pausing, her arm shoots out and slaps my cheek. Without a chance to shield myself, I cower against the wall. I feel flattened. My face feels lopsided. Everyone has heard the crack. Dieter stops chewing his roll. Mutti pulls me upstairs; her pinching grasp hurts my arm. I try to tug free. This makes her grab my ear. When we enter the apartment, she sends me to my room. I was never hit at Oma's house, nor embarrassed in front of my friends. Even Franz saw me humiliated.

In bed, I try to figure out how to deal with her and my outrage. The next morning I open the subject of last night and explain to her that I was wrong to stay out late, but she was wrong to punish me in front of everyone. She says that her parents always punished her in front of others, and that I have it much easier than she had it, that I am lucky.

"Why am I lucky?" I ask.

She answers that I am lucky because she is a modern mother. This frustrates me so much that I don't trust myself to go on talking.

On Friday afternoon, Frau Zudi, satisfied that the work week is over, wiggles her plump little shoulder into her cardigan.

"I think you will like the fried Spam slices with potato salad," she says .
"Have a nice weekend. See you on Monday." I like her, she's a cuddly-looking person. I wouldn't mind going home with her for a weekend.

Monday is my first day at the new school. Fräulein Trott is a pale blond with hair like a bird's nest, but at least she doesn't wear a silver cross. When I said good bye to Frau Potter, she let me read the inscription on her pin, "*Das Kind adelt die Mutter.*" (the child ennobles the mother.)

"I earned it," she said. "Bringing up six children during a war is not easy." I agreed with her.

"I expect big grown-up girls of your age to obey me. When I leave the classroom, I shall put you on your honor," Fräulein Trott announces. I pick up my pen and start writing with a shaking hand. I hope that I don't make an ink blot on my composition paper.

After school, I rush home. When I place my key inside the lock I hear Franz and Mutti shouting. He sounds cross and so does she. I'd rather not go in right now, but a neighbor passes me on her way upstairs and I feel awkward standing in front of our door. I let myself in, and they are staring at each other in the kitchen. She's crying. "Take her in your arms, you jerk," I think to myself. He does nothing of the kind. He comes out of the kitchen, takes her by the elbow and leads her to the living-room sofa.

"Sit down Elli," he says, pushing her down. He turns to me and tells me to go to my room and close the door. I wanted to tell them about school, but I leave. I don't close my door all the way.

"This is no good, Elli," he says in a loud whisper. "You've had your children. You know what it's like to watch a youngster grow who is part of you ... resembles

you One day I will want a son ... or a daughter. I understand that you can't start again. From the beginning, we knew that our love was madness."

"Well, you didn't think it was madness when you first pursued me. When did the madness part start?" I hear her cry. Then there is silence. Soon it sounds like they are making up. I am relieved. I hate to see Mutti cry. She looks too unhappy when she cries, I can't stand it. It breaks my heart because I can't help her.

Hedda from across the street invites me to her birthday party on Saturday, the last week in September. My birthday is next week, on October 1. Well both be 10 years old. Mutti finds a rare chocolate bar.

"Everything is available on the black market," she says.

By black market she means that gray-haired Frau Knoche has a way to buy hard-to-get food, like coffee, cocoa, sugar, cigarettes and chocolate. Mutti sent me last week to get coffee from Frau Knoche. She measured blond coffee beans out of a large burlap sack, which she kept in the bathroom. I paid her with the sealed envelope Mutti gave me. Mutti roasted the beans in a large flat pan. She said that they can't be sold roasted because the coffee odor would alert neighbors who then might report Frau Knoche to the police.

Now, Mutti breaks off half the chocolate bar, wraps it in silver paper, places a bow on the package. My birthday gift is ready. Hedda is delighted with my present. At the party I feel uncomfortable when Hedda and Karin talk about their confirmation ceremony, knowing I will never have one.

My brother accepts a seasonal job in Wengen, Switzerland. "It's an opportunity to see another place besides Berlin," he says. I will miss him. He's always leaving for work and spends his free time with Sonja. I generally see him asleep, and don't spend much time with him, but I will miss him.

Instead, Franz lives at our house. Sometimes he offers to help me finish my homework. I let him, because the material is more advanced than it was in my former school and I need the help. But his prickly impatience intimidates me. I can tell that he doesn't think I'm very bright. Maybe I'm not; I don't know. I don't feel comfortable enough to confide in Mutti about it because she is too busy and preoccupied with other matters. She giggles when Franz is around, and I am glad she is finally laughing again. I don't want to burden her.

I obey Mutti and start Hebrew school. She says, because my grandparents, Hanni, Herbert and all the others were killed, it's time that I learn about the Jewish religion. It is probably simpler to be Lutheran, but for some reason Mutti considers herself Jewish.

I walk to the religious school by myself. Hallways are lined with drawings, containing mysterious symbols. I like the candlestick with eight different-colored candles best. The class is small -- only eight students. Freckle-faced Mr. Richard from London, England, wears a light blue skullcap. His habit of rotating his head to release tension, causes us to practice rotating our heads when he's not looking. Most of the students are not German; two have numbers tattooed on the

inside of the right arm. A boy named Max says that in his camp he saw a little girl play with a ball made of socks that were tied together. Before she could be stopped, she threw the ball to a camp guard, and he threw the ball to the electrified fence, knowing that the child would be electrocuted when she retrieved the ball.

I am in awe of Max. I don't really know what to say to him because he suffered so much, while I survived living with Oma. I feel guilty even though I didn't do anything bad. He's seen atrocities I don't want to think about. I know I will dream about that little girl and her sock ball. A few of the German-speaking students have returned from Belgium and Denmark where their families were hidden during the war with relatives or friends.

Mr. Richard paces our classroom impatiently, hands plunged deep into his pockets. "So much to learn, not enough time," is his message.

"The Jews are a people descended from the Hebrews and the Israelites, from the tribes of Israel. Our religion is called Judaism. It is founded both on the Old Testament and the Torah"

Since I haven't practiced any religion, other than going to a few Lutheran services with Oma, I begin attending Friday night services. I went to services once in 1947 at the *Rykestrasse* Synagogue. Rudi sat with very few men on the street level, while I sat with Tante Gerda on the almost empty second level. I, of course, didn't understand anything but I enjoyed the solemn singing. I could tell that Tante Gerda didn't understand either.

I go alone, because there is no one to go with me. The men sit in the front of

the small room, and the women sit apart in the back. I notice that the men drape a blue and white-striped, fringed shawl around their shoulders. Several of them match the caps on their head. The men frequently face to the right direction and bow several time. I do the same, although I don't understand why. I do like the quiet, solemn atmosphere and the feeling of belonging. Temple gives me time to try to figure out what religion means to me. I am not sure, but overriding everything is the question, "Why are Jews hated so?" No matter how hard I think, I never find an acceptable answer.

A female English officer clad in a navy blue uniform trimmed with gold braiding is frequently at services. She smiles at me, and I smile in return. I wonder if she knows the answer. One rainy Friday night she offers me a ride home. I give the chauffeur directions to my house. She says her name is Elaine. I tell her that I am Vivi. She pronounces it like it contains two v's in the center. Elaine makes swimming motions with her arms. I shake my head indicating that I don't swim. She says something else I can't understand when the car stops. I duck into our house quickly, glad that I didn't have to get soaked.

When I unlock the door, I hear Mutti say, "Oh, Franz, please don't sulk. I spoke too quickly; I'm sorry. I do think that you have good taste. That dress is just a little too tight for me, but I do like it."

"I'm not sulking. Children sulk. Vivi sulks. You're the one who bit my head off." His eyes land on me, "We mustn't stifle each other," he says and whirls around. He pushes past me and storms down the hall, slamming the front door as he leaves.

"You don't stifle me," she calls after him. When she turns to me, she shrugs her shoulders and says that he's in a bad mood and that she should have been more careful. She rubs her eyes with a fist and returns to the kitchen. I stick my tongue out in Franz's direction for making her unhappy and take the dogs out for a walk in the rain. I can't even tell her my exciting news about being driven in a car and sitting in the back seat with an English lady in uniform. After walking around for 30 minutes, I return and find Franz working in the kitchen, helping her put dinner on the table. A stray lock of hair perpetually falls over his forehead, which he pushes back halfheartedly. He's really quite good-looking if didn't look so sullen. He's even set the table, which is normally my job. Fresh yellow flowers are in the vase. He chatters rapidly while we eat, I guess hoping to erase the ugly scene I witnessed.

"The newspaper reports that Berlin needs 25 tons of supplies a day. The papers have named the DC 4 planes, *Rosinenbomber* (raisin bombs.) He winks at me, as he munches on a chicken leg.

"You can tell them at school that every 90 seconds a plane lands; the record is every 62 seconds. Imagine that."

All evening he smiles and calls Mutti by his special name, "*Mausi*." (little mouse) I wonder how they made up so quickly. When she's mad at me, it's not so easy to get back into her good graces.

I write Papa a letter after dinner and homework. I'd like to complain to him about my home life, but what can he do. He's in another country and I feel disloyal to Mutti if I complain. So I just write a casual note; everything is fine. I like school and Hebrew school. I have lots of friends. I send my love to baby Gaby and Mia and a

paper kiss.

For a long time I lie in bed wondering if what I saw happen between Mutti and Franz is very good or very bad. Before deciding on an answer, I fall asleep.

Ali returns from Wengen, Switzerland, in January. He made more money than in Berlin, but didn't want to stay for the 1949 winter season. "I got homesick for Sonja, and yes, you, too," he says, mussing my hair. He smokes "Gold Dollar" cigarettes. "I like that name," he says, puffing smoke. He offers a cigarette to Franz and one to Mutti. He loves wearing the yellow T shirt with a red Swiss logo, even though it's freezing. I like the large multi-colored ball he brought me.

The next day I use the *U Bahn* to visit Opa. Mutti says she can't come with me because of work. The train passes the same sign "You are leaving the English Sector," that Oma showed me when we visited Mutti last year. So much has changed for me since then.

"Does it seem strange to be back home again?" Opa asks me.

"No," but I mean yes. It is strange without Oma, but I don't want to make him feel bad. I've been afraid to come here. Luckily, he's come to us. He introduces me to a widow named Helene, he calls her "Helli." Apparently, she spends a lot of time with him because I see strange sweaters and coats hanging in the white hall closet. He tells me it's hard to be alone. He gets lonely and drinks too much Schnapps.

"I am used to having a woman take care of me," he says.

"I understand," I say, and I do understand. I am lonely too. Since Oma's death a year ago, we've all been lost. She was the glue of our small family. I have matured a lot in the past year. I understand so much more than I did a year ago, especially about a love relationship. I know they can break one's heart -- at least Mutti's heart. First it was my father, and now Franz gives her grief.

"My daughters live their own lives. That's how it should be, but my life isn't over yet," Opa says.

Dark-haired Helene, whose white skin looks like the sun never shines on her, serves Opa and me a slice of pound cake and coffee on new white dishes, without cracks or chips. The apartment looks different. Bright yellow light reflects shiny new white floor covering and I realize the cracked gray linoleum has been replaced. New red-and-white-checked curtains on the windows -- There is a matching tablecloth. I feel like a visitor in a house that used to be Oma's but is now Helene's.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FATHER'S DAUGHTER

"I like your pink panties," Dieter says to me, with a triumphant grin. "I like your blue ones, too," he says to Karin. "And yesterday's white ones were cute, too," he tells me.

We look at each other with dismay. He's right; mine are pink, and Karin confirms that hers are blue. I check my skirt for tears but find none. A few days later as I come out of the house with the dogs, Pitti jerks forward, making me drop her leash. I bend down over our house entrance grate to retrieve it and spot Dieter's face, looking up at me. He looks as shocked as I am. That evening he tells us what color panties other ladies in the house are wearing, but the girls and I threaten to tell his father if he doesn't stop peeking.

The following week, Mutti catches me on the street beyond my eight o'clock curfew time. She scolds me in front of everyone and makes me go upstairs with her and Franz. I am relieved that my ear isn't pulled in front of everyone. Before she has a chance to hit me, Dieter knocks on our door. When she opens it, he says that she should hit him because he talked me into staying out and so deserves the punishment more than I.

She doesn't hit me that evening. At night, with my head burrowed under my covers, I talk to Oma about Mutti and how unfair it is that she likes Franz more than me -- even though I'm not the one who makes her cry.

On Saturday I shop for Hedda's birthday present at the open market that is located two streets away. The Russian blockade ended May 12, 1949, and now there is food everywhere. A Würstel (hot dog) stand is next to the cheese stand. Delicious odors come from the roast chicken and smoked pork, hock stand. I choose a blond princess puppet from the puppet stand as a present for her. I'd love to have her myself. We girls often put on a little Sunday puppet theater for the little children on our street and need a new princess as competition for our snobbish black-haired one.

For my 11th birthday, Mutti takes me to a special movie on *Kurfürstendam*. We see "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." It's my first cartoon movie and I love it. I could easily see it four times more. After the movie, we go to *Kempinsky* for coffee and cake. I don't order an éclair; I last ate that with Oma the day she died.

I explain to Mutti the meaning of many Jewish holidays. She remembers some of the stories I tell her. The miracle of Hanukkah fascinates me most. In the second century B.C., a one-day supply of oil burned for eight days and eight nights after Judah Maccabee and his followers recaptured Jerusalem's Holy Temple from their Syrian oppressors. From this information, I gather that there has always been war and oppression. But Hitler was more methodical, and he had a lot of willing help.

The English lady no longer comes to Friday night services, and I attend infrequently. I tell God that I hope He understands my confusion. I wish I could see the English lady again because I've started English studies in school and would love to try to speak the few words I've learned. Franz likes to help me with pronunciation. He says that I sound too German when I speak. My tongue is too guttural, he says. Privately, I don't think he sounds any better. He's impressed with anything English or American and plays the American music station on the radio any time he's home. Ali and he discuss why they like the Harry James band better than Tommy Dorsey's Band. One reason is the lead singer, Frank Sinatra. I prefer German music with words I can understand.

"Pack die Badehose ein, Nimm Dein Kleines Schwesterlein, und dann gehen wir raus nach Wannsee. ("pack your bathing trunks, take your little sister by the hand and let's go to lake Wannsee") continues to be my favorite song. I like to sing it when Ali is around. Maybe it will inspire him next summer to take me to Wannsee.

"I am marrying Helene next Sunday and would like you to come for a little celebration," Opa says on an afternoon visit to us one cold Saturday in November. I set the dish filled serving tray on the cocktail table and pour him a cup of coffee.

"Father, I just can't go to your wedding," says Mutti, her voice rising. "My loyalty is to my mother. How can you make another Frau Gimpel? Live with her, but don't marry her. I don't understand you." She jumps up from her chair and clicks on a table lamp, which shows her flushed red face.

"We can't live together, we're too old-fashioned for that. She's a good woman, and I will treat her with the respect she deserves." He tries to meet Mutti's eyes, but she looks at a spot below his chin.

"And Vivi has a Sunday school test and can't go either," she snaps. My cheeks feel hot with embarrassment. I lower my eyes.

"My test was canceled Mutti," I blurt, without considering consequences.

"I can come, Opa." I can't tell if he takes any notice of Mutti's snub; but when I look up, he's smiling at me. I can feel Mutti's glare, but don't care. She's hurt his feelings. I am surprised at how hard she is.

"What time should I be there?" I ask.

"The ceremony is at noon; but if you can't get there that early, three o'clock will be fine. Elli, if you can make it, please come."

I help him on with his coat, dreading what I know will come when the door closes behind him. Mutti turns to me, her face flushed with anger.

"How dare you," she says. Her blazing eyes stab me with accusation. "You know I don't want you to go."

"I am not mad at Opa and he deserves to be happy. I think Oma would understand. He is afraid to be alone, as are you." I face her, making a fist with my nails digging into my flesh for courage. "And so am I."

"You have a deceitful character," she says angrily, "just like your father. I could never count on him either, and now you double-cross me. You're following in his huge footsteps. Nice going, father's daughter," she says sarcastically, pressing

her finger on my nose. "Go to your room and don't come out till you're called."

I have to eat dinner in my room and don't leave it until school the next morning. I don't mind. She and Franz are no fun anyway. Mutti is not friendly all week; luckily, she and Franz are out when I leave for Opa's wedding on Sunday.

It is clear and not very cold at two o'clock when I transfer to the streetcar which stops one block past my former school. The snow is gone from the road, although there are still snow banks at the curbs and in the front yard of the school. I stop to stare into the dark windows of the shops on *Prenzlauer Allee*. My stomach has knots from potatoes and cabbage, which I probably gulped, hoping to leave the house without Mutti seeing me. It does feel strange to go to Opa's wedding celebration even though I fully understand the reason. It still doesn't feel right. If Oma were alive, all this wouldn't take place. I hope Tante Gerda will be there; but when Opa answers the door, he tells me that she is not coming.

Helene introduces me to her daughter Hilda, who could be her twin without the age lines, and Hilda's good-looking, red-haired husband Karl. Only one other couple is visiting – the Finkels – old friends of Opa's new wife. I am relieved that the wedding ceremony was at noon, because I do feel sad that Opa had to remarry, although I understand why. Only the daughter and the Finkels were present. I press a little blue glass vase in his hand. I bought it at the open market and was going to give it to Mutti for Christmas, but I would rather give it to him. He shows it to Helene, and she seems to like it. Opa pours a round of champagne, and I help myself to a tray of pastries. His eyes twinkle; he's relaxed and in a sparkling mood.

"How did you meet Helene?" I ask, when he tells me to come and sit with him on the living-room couch.

"In the store," he chuckles. "She came in to have a broken watch repaired. It was from her deceased husband, and she was going to give it to her son-in-law Karl. Helene lost her husband in the war; he never came back from Russia."

"So what did you do. Ask her out on a date?"

"No, it wasn't that formal. We just talked a lot that first time; she was lonely, as was I." He sips from his glass of champagne. "I told her that when she came to pick up the watch, I would ask her out to dinner. I told her to think about it until then. You know, I'm 12 years older than she is."

I look at his face and decide that he does look much older than Helene.

"A week later, she returned near closing time and said that she was hungry and would like to eat dinner with me that evening. We got to be good friends.... I will always love Oma," he pats my hand and I believe him, "but I got tired of loneliness."

When I get home I dread facing Mutti, but she seems resigned. She doesn't even ask me about the afternoon. I feel like a traitor. I wish she were easier to talk to, but she never wants to hear what I have to say.

Mutti asks me to choose either a bicycle or a rabbit fur coat for Christmas. I choose a bicycle. Ever since I learned to ride Sonja's bicycle it has been my dream to have a bicycle of my own.

On Christmas Eve I receive a white fur coat with black spots. My show of pleasure is fake. I am the only one of my friends who doesn't own a bike. I admire the slick way they circle around me while I have to stand still. There are so many ways to look good on a bike. One-handed, two-handed, or hunched over like a racer. The fur coat sheds white hair all the time. Ali and Franz nickname me *Pelztier* (fur animal) because my coat leaves a white imprint wherever I sit or lean. I feel I leave a puddle of white fur wherever I stand.

Franz cooks the Christmas dinner with Mutti's help. We have roast goose. I set the table in the living room with white, gold-rimmed dishes, and put a small red flower pot in the center. To my relief there is no argument today. Ali celebrates with his girlfriend's family.

On Sunday morning, something different is in the air. I feel it when I bring fresh rolls home and shake my rabbit coat and boots free of snow. Mutti drops the rolls into the brown bread basket. I sit down and reach for a poppy-seed topped bun.

"By summer, I am going to immigrate to Australia," Ali announces, with an air of expectation and sparkling eyes.

"What?" says Mutti, hastily replacing her roll on the plate.

"It's a great opportunity, and I've applied. I need to do something with my life besides improving my onion-chopping skills," he says, chopping the air with his free hand. "I thought we all could go. What do you think?"

"Well, I am not going to Australia," she declares. "It's hot, dusty and wild.

Why are you going there? Do you have a job? What's the great opportunity? You're splitting what's left of our family." She taps her fingernail on the table, signaling her turmoil.

I wait to see if she continues to argue, but she doesn't. I can think of many reasons for not going, if she can't.

"Stop that. I hate that sound," she says to Ali who is flexing his knuckles. He folds his hands and examines them.

"Why not?" he asks. They have schools Vivi can attend, and we'll find work." I butter my roll and notice that my hand trembles. This conversation seems unreal and quite impossible.

"I heard you say it's a great opportunity. I still don't know what's your opportunity?" Mutti says. Ali studies his coffee cup.

"No. Australia is out," she says, looking at her house slippers.

"What about Sonja? Would you marry her and go together?"

"No. I can't take her out of her secure home to uncertainty. I have to go alone first. Then I'll send for her."

"I actually don't mind leaving Germany," Mutti says thoughtfully. "I've seen too much of the dark side here. I am ready for a total change. Since Germany lost the war, everyone claims to be squeaky clean. All the Nazis are in our imagination, I suppose. I'm still angry at everybody. "She removes one house slipper and replaces it for no reason. "I still want to confront strangers and ask how they stood during the war. Did you love Hitler? Did you fly his flag and thrill over his voice? Did you

turn in your Jewish neighbors like so many? Did you gain from their suffering? What did you do? And you?" Her angry finger points at imaginary people.

My head turns from one to the other. I can't believe what's being said. What will happen to me? I don't want to go anywhere.

Icy January snow blows through the kitchen window as Mutti gets up and snaps the window shut. "I've seen too much. Franz and I are not working out anyway." She returns to her chair, fluffing the cushion before sitting down. "We will be breaking up." She lights two cigarettes and hands one to Ali. "The end is in sight. For some reason he had to spend this week end with his father. That sounds fishy. I think he's lying to me. He is probably courting someone young and new." There is a look of pain on her face as she inhales deeply. "Lately, he's always in a bad mood. I feel like I'm walking on egg shells around him. He brings me these tight shorts and skimpy blouses that I can't wear. Living alone is better then living with someone who wants me to be what I'm not." She sighs. "I will miss the special feeling of being in love. It's probably the last time I'll allow myself to love."

"You'll love again. Franz is too young for you, mother. You always knew that," says Ali. He gets up and walks around to the stove for more coffee.

"I've thought of America," she says. "Would you consider going there with us?"

"America?" He purses his lips, grinning with pleasure. "America."

"How would we get there?" I ask.

"By ship," says Mutti. "We have to first apply for a visa, but through the Hias

Joint organization we could get passage. If you are a victim of Fascism, there is no problem. I'll look into it further."

Ali is pacing back and forth in the kitchen like a tiger in the zoo.

"Life in America will be hard," she says. "We know nothing, except that we like the music. It means really learning to speak a new language -- not just a word that sound good." Mutti looks at me without seeing me.

I hold my breath, stirring the cocoa around and around, watching bubbles trail my spoon. I hope they are only chatting, but I have a sinking feeling they are not. When they rise from the table, I am not sure what's going to happen next. I only know that I'm not interested in going to America.

That night I lie in bed very tense, despairing over the new development. I can't sleep because the jumbled pieces of the puzzle float around in my head; Ali, Mutti, America, Papa. I remember the book I recently read about a polar bear cub. While he was napping on a floating chunk of ice, it floated all the way to America, landing in New York. The book showed huge sky-high buildings, taller than clouds. They frightened the bear, and the thought frightens me too. The furthest I have traveled is to Ferch and my summer camp.

I awake, unrefreshed from a troubled and fitful sleep. The other bed in my room is rumpled but empty. I am dissapointed that Ali has already left for work. I wanted to talk to him, maybe talk him out of going. I can't believe that they have chosen a new country for me in one hour.

When I walk into Mutti's room, she brushes her eyes with a handkerchief.

She lowers her book and gives me a long look. I don't think she really sees me.

"Are we going to America?" I ask.

"Yes we are."

She picks up her book again. Her face is closed. The conversation is finished. My heart sinks like a heavy rock in water because I know that no amount of crying -- not even buckets of tears -- can convince her not to go.

I write Papa about the new plans. I have to accept her decision although I feel furious with her. And yet, a small part of me is intrigued to go to a place others dream of. I wish I could see Papa's face when he reads my letter. Actually, I'd love to see his face period.

His answer comes within three weeks. He hopes that Mutti has thought it through. Being a foreigner in a strange country is hard, he writes ... "take it from me."

I believe you Papa, but I have no say in the matter. And, yes, she thought it through. It took Mutti a full 60 minutes to decide.

Our notice comes at the beginning of May, 1950. We can depart Germany in July. On the same day, Ali's permission for Australia also arrives. He decides that we three will go to America.

We are asked to come for an immigration interview immediately.

"Are you insane, homosexual, alcoholic, criminal or immoral?" the man in the swivel chair asks.

"No," we each answer.

"Where would you like to go -- New York or San Francisco?"

"New York," Mutti says. "I like city living. Berlin is a large city, and New York is considered the most exciting city in the world."

Injections jab me against many ills, and Mutti uses her savings to buy each of us a new down quilt to keep us warm. In Berlin it is fashionable for young teens my age to wear multi-colored striped socks. Mutti buys me lots of striped socks.

Photos are taken, passports are issued, and Franz moves out. Mutti turns to me in the hallway, as the door slams behind him. Her face is the face I saw after her jail stay. I feel helpless in her grief. She goes into the living room and closes the door. I hear her weep for a long while. Finally, I can't wait any longer. I bring her a cup of hot tea, like I saw Opa do many times. I pour a generous shot of Schnapps into her tea. Her eyes look dark and haunted, and her tear-stained face is swollen.

"Maybe you'll meet a nice man in America," I say. I wish I could comfort her better.

Hedda and Dieter say they envy me.

"Would you want to trade places with me?" I ask.

No one wants to trade places with me. They say that they would love to see America and then return home. Dieter seems especially sad. He says that maybe he'll come and visit me one day if I promise to write him. At school my teacher says she hopes I have a wonderful life in America.

"Send the class a postcard," she says.

It's easy for everyone to wish me well. They are not the ones having to leave. All this well wishing. It is starting to irritate me. I am not totally unwilling to go, just very frightened of leaving everything familiar. No-one talks to me about how I feel or what I expect. I have no concept of what the name "America" stands for.

Mutti says it's a good thing she didn't get me a bike because at least I'll have a warm coat next winter. I suppose America has winters.

On my next visit to Opa, I have the feeling that this is the last time I will ever see him. Inside his apartment I walk into each room. I look at the bed where the Gestapo officer questioned me and touch Oma's piano, which probably hasn't been played since her death. Reluctantly, I turn my back and enter Opa's former workshop, which is now Helene's sewing room. My bed is gone, but my friend, the cuckoo clock, still hangs on the wall. In the foyer, I open the white closet once more, and see a little girl, six years ago, lying very still under stacks of clothing, afraid that groping hands will discover her. A piece of myself will always be in this closet.

From the kitchen window, I look down on the courtyard at the single tree.

I feel bad that Opa will have another loss in his life. Dark-haired Helene looks younger than ever.

"What does she see in him," Mutti has said to me. "He's not rich, so it's not for his money."

"She's as lonely as he is, " I replied. "Besides, Opa is good company."

He does need someone, especially now, when we are going to another country. I am relieved that he isn't alone. We are sitting at the familiar kitchen

table; so much of my life has taken place in this kitchen. I lean over and kiss his cheek. He strokes my arm. I notice the brown spots on the back of his gnarled hand and feel a slight tremor in his touch. The lines on his face have deepened; they show his 72 years. I try to ignore that this might be our last time together. I brought him my latest picture. It was taken for my passport. His face lights up with pleasure.

"I want to thank you, Opa, for taking care of me for so many difficult years. I don't think I ever told you that before. I don't think I was ever grateful enough. I didn't understand how good you were to me and at what great risk to you," I say.

"You're my grandchild. There's nothing that I wouldn't do for you," he says, blotting his nose.

"Remember when you said, 'One day life will be normal again?' Without Oma, nothing is normal. Be happy with Helene. I love you." I stand up to leave, lean over to kiss his forehead and run out of the house, biting my lip to stop from crying.

But my eyes swim with tears as I run across the street to Tante Gerda and Uncle Rudi. They look troubled and pat my hand. I feel troubled too. It is very hard to say goodbye. "Your mother has always been impetuous. She always got into trouble. Time and age haven't changed her," says Tante Gerda. "We will visit you in America, right Rudi?" He nods his head and unlocks a glass cabinet and hands me a large piece of chocolate. Before he locks the cabinet, he gives Gerda a cupful of coffee-beans in answer to her pleading.

"If you want to, we would gladly let you live with us," he says, pocketing the

key.

"I will tell Mutti," I say, but I already know her answer. Also seeing how miserly he is makes me see Rudi with different eyes. Poor Tante Gerda. After everything she's been through for his sake, she has to beg him for coffee-beans.

Mutti is reading a book when I get home. Her feet are elevated on the cocktail table.

"Would you take the dogs out?" she says. "I am too tired to walk any more today."

"I want to tell you something," I say, "but it can wait till I get back."

While I walk the dogs, I try to compose how to ask Mutti about the offer Rudi made me. Susie takes her time to find just the right spot of grass. I don't mind because I am so confused that I don't know where I want to be. I know that I can't change Mutti's mind about anything she wants to do anyway, and no amount of crying will convince her that going to America is not a good idea. Mutti is still reading when I return. "Staying with Rudi is out," she says. It's nice that he offered, but it's out of the question." I am not surprised by her answer and don't fuss, because I am not certain that I would be happy with them anyway.

"What are you reading?" I ask, tilting my head sideways to see the title and to prolong the conversation.

"It is about long ago life in America," she says.

"You must like it a lot, because you read every minute. What is the name of

the book?" I ask.

"I love this book. It's called '*Vom Winde Verweht*.' (Gone With The Wind.) When you're much, much older, you should read it. I need to read; it helps me stay sane. I need to lose myself in books."

She picks the book up, and I know our talk is finished. I promise myself not to interrupt her so much when she reads. I too want her to stay sane. I'll need her in America.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GOODBYE BERLIN

"Everything in there is for you," Mutti says to Frau Zudi. "I'll just take the pots and pans." Turning to me, she says, "You know, the ones we found in the rubble." I know that dishes and glasses are too fragile to pack, but I am relieved to see her wrap a kitchen towel around the crystal bowl from Oma's house. She lays it in the trunk on top of three new down quilts. I'd rather take my familiar blue blanket. Everything is boxed, and I'm packing my suitcase for America.

"Do you want anything from this cabinet?" Frau Zudi asks, holding up a blue glazed jug. She's already filled a box with glasses and our flower-rimmed dishes. Mutti told her that she can have most of our household things, but because she already has a set of dishes, she said she'd sell them at the Sunday Flea Market. I like our dishes and hate to think of them being sold to strangers. I'd rather have Frau Zudi use them. So I decide to sneak one small butter plate from the top of her box and place it in the middle of my suitcase between the folds of my rabbit coat.

"Frau Ert, I don't know how you can pack up and leave everything behind to immigrate to another country. It's absolutely beyond me," says Frau Zudi, as she fills a carton with our sofa pillows.

It's beyond me too, I think to myself. No one is chasing us like the Gestapo

hunted Papa. My mind goes back in time. I can still see Mutti's face after jail, although I still don't know how many bad things happened to her. Mutti never talks about the war or all the people who got picked up and never returned. I've asked her about a picture of a little girl and me in our family album. Mutti said her name was Tatjana. "That's Ida's daughter. Ida and I were school chums. I was at her wedding. They were picked up and never returned," she said without any emotion. More than once she has told me how distrusting she is of Germans, but I doubt that she can tell Frau Zudi.

"Nothing is keeping me here, Frau Zudi," Mutti shrugs, straightening her back and rubbing a spot between her shoulder blades. "Really nothing." She claps her hands. "So, we are going."

"What will happen to the dogs?" I ask, twisting my jacket button back and forth. If it falls off I have to sew it back on myself, because Mutti can't sew. I've been watching Mutti and Frau Zudi pack. Such frantic activity. I feel as if I'm in a kind of trance. Such frantic activity. Mutti is discarding clothes, books, knickknacks, pictures, rugs, curtains, doilies, chairs. She is searching, choosing and rejecting. My heart sinks even though the radio plays my favorite song about going to the Wannsee Lake.

"The dogs ... the dogs ... Sonja and her mother will keep them for us until I send for them," Mutti says.

"I will miss them," I say.

"Yes, so will I." Mutti wraps our flatware in dish towels. I guess they will go

with us. The living room looks like a light-filled, wall-papered shell. It contains a couch, two chairs and a lamp, with dark outlines where pictures used to hang. Cartons of our stuff are everywhere. I pry up a flap and reach for the red rose on Oma's old black, dress-up hat. I'd forgotten all about it. Now I blow the dust off and try it on. I check my profile in the hallway mirror. I feel ridiculous under the cocked brim. Even the single rose is wrinkled, and the hat covers my ears. But I love the memories it holds. As a child I'd worn it with pride, prancing in the kitchen for Oma, tripping over her high heels. I bring it to my box and carefully flatten it over the top.

"You can't take that with you," says Mutti, clutching a bag filled with shoes. "We only have room for important things." I tear the hat off and fling it in a corner.

We stand near the curb where cars and trucks pass, waiting for our chance to cross to the railway station. It is late morning. Although it seems warm outside, the sky is gray and clouding over.

"Come on! Why are you so slow!" Mutti yell's, picking on me again. I drag my feet, trying not to slip out of my new, too-large brown shoes. The ground beneath me tries to hold them. They have to last a while, Mutti said; that's why they are almost a size too large. When I don't watch which way my feet move, I look up and see everybody hurry past. Parents pull little children. An elderly lady uses her cane to stop and rest. Red-capped porters loaded with baggage push past us. All are certain of their destination. In the huge station Mutti asks a uniformed man where

to catch the train to Bremen. I watch a blur of activity; people arrive at the station while others hurry away. Ali steals a kiss from Sonja, whose nose is red. He told me that she's been crying for weeks. A young fellow jostles an old woman's arm, causing her to drop a basket of food. He turns to apologize while running and shouts that he's late for his train. I help her pick up rolling turnips and crouch under benches to retrieve potatoes. A little girl brings back an apron full of additional potatoes, and the basket is full again. Mutti did not see me help and apparently was looking for me.

"Your hair is tangled and your socks are twisted. How can you get messy so quickly?" she scolds when I emerge.

I try to win her back and show her the old woman I helped.

"You should have told me what you're doing," she says. "You worried me. Bad things can happen to young girls."

"I'm sorry," I say, and think back to the time last winter when Hedda and I went ice skating. We cut through a park to reach a frozen pond. Last fall's leaves covered the ground, matted and brown. No one else was on the path. Wind rippled the leaves remaining on branches. Hedda and I looked up to watch a black bird squawk. Suddenly I felt that we were no longer alone. Without warning, a tall man stepped from behind a tree and blocked our path. His hair was short and gray. It took me a few minutes to understand what he was saying. He said that his pee pee was cold and needed warming from us. Abruptly, he dropped his hand which covered his genitals and said that since he is willing to show us his private parts we should

show him ours. I stared at his penis a second longer than necessary, because I never had seen one, but Hedda grabbed my hand and we ran without stopping. My skates dug into my shoulder with each bounce. I didn't stop to adjust them until we heard voices and saw people skating on the frozen lake.

We went home the long way, making sure to walk with other couples. I never told Mutti because I was afraid she wouldn't let me go skating again. She's never explained what kind of bad people I should fear; but after that man, I knew she meant people like him.

Over the noise on the crowded platform I hear Mutti saying, "I am glad we're all together.... After all, you are the man in our family." She looks at Ali, who blushes.

The train hoots, sputtering clouds of white steam and smoke which envelop me. A guard comes hurrying along the platform holding his red flag and blowing his whistle. Last-minute passengers push past us to board the train to Bremen.

"We'd better go," Ali says. He kisses the sobbing Sonja once more. Her face is streaked with tears; her nose is shiny red.

"Oh, Ali, why are we doing this?" She asks once more.

"You are coming as soon as I've saved the money. I love you with all my heart," he replies in a low but emphatic voice. I feel envious that Ali loves her that much.

After hugging Sonja, I follow Mutti up the steps to our baggage-stacked compartment. Watching them, I press my nose to the window. Ali boards, but

immediately pushes down a window and reaches his hand out to Sonja.

"Take a deep breath of our last *Berliner Luft*," (Berlin air,") says Mutti, as wheels begin to turn, grinding and screeching against the iron tracks. We move very slowly at first. Once we leave the station, a pale blue sky lights up the compartment. Mutti has a book on her lap but is not reading it. Her lips are pursed, her brow furrowed in concentration as she stares straight ahead with her fingers tight on the rim of the purse on her lap. Ali is sitting rigid, his face stony, staring with unblinking intensity. My brown fake leather suitcase is by my seat, packed with my rabbit coat, striped socks, clothing from the American organization called Hias, new books from Tante Gerda and two dolls with the clothing I sewed for them for the trip.

The train rushes past sectioned fields of green, yellow and brown, dotted with occasional trees sheltering cows from the sun. Low-rising hills follow and horses are seen pulling tractors, marking the land with narrow black ditches. I wonder who lives behind the walls of the farmhouses? What is life like? Is it hard? Easy? How did they survive the war? Glistening ponds flash by. We whiz past cars. Mutti and I sit across from each other, separated by a little table holding my note-pad and pencil.

"Please present your tickets." A man's gruff voice shatters the quiet of the compartment. The short conductor is framed in the doorway, and Mutti hands him our train tickets. He returns the tickets without uttering a single word. I would like to tell him that we are going to America, leaving forever. But I don't make a sound.

Leaning my head against the seat, I close my eyes and formulate the letter I

want to write Papa. An ocean is taking me to a new country, separating us even further. I've never seen an ocean. Going to America might as well be going to the moon. It's equally far away and strange. Six years have passed since I last saw Papa. My memories of him are just short moments. Life was different, and I was another girl. He has not seen how I have grown, how my face has changed, how I have changed. He has another little girl. She's four years old now. I wonder if she speaks only Italian. I remember when I was four I visited Oma Ert. She made me sugar candy. I also remember that day at the racetrack when I was almost six. The day started out to be such fun. But bad endings can have good beginnings. I'll never forget how Uncle Herbert was taken from us at the racetrack by the Gestapo. So many memories. I have no one to share them with. Mutti says she doesn't want me to remind her of those years. Oma knew everything, but she is gone. Our last day together also had a great start. She watered her plants. I helped. Then we ate eclairs. I shiver and feel my hair rise on my neck. What a different turn my life might have taken if I had told Opa about her headaches. Perhaps I could have saved her. If she were alive, I wouldn't have to go to America. The train jolts to a stop. I rub my eyes awake.

"Bremen." A porter comes to our compartment and asks if he can help us with our luggage.

"Yes." We need help. More help than you can give us, I think to myself.

The taxi driver stops in front of a square, gray building that leans against empty blue space. "This used to be a school building," the driver explains. People sit on a low stone wall chatting, as they watch us pile out of the cab with an air of

expectancy. I gaze up at the wide, double staircase and wonder how our trunk will get up all those stairs to our sleeping quarters until the ship departs. But it does, with help from the driver. Mutti introduces herself to a gray haired woman sitting at a brown desk and hiding behind an information sign. She tells us to go to hall B and find two empty bunk beds.

We pass large dormitory rooms and find ours. The room is divided by many blankets and sheets to create an illusion of privacy. Mutti chooses a bunk bed next to a faded blue sheet. Mine is the upper bunk; Mutti will sleep below. I can't see who is behind the sheet, but the voices I hear are foreign and sound angry. Ali is in the men's section and can't come into our hall. He has to find hall S on another floor. We will meet on the first floor for dinner at six.

Mutti opens her suitcase and tells me to do the same. "We might as well unpack and make ourselves at home," she says with a sigh.

It doesn't take long to arrange my robe and towel. I prefer keeping my clothes in my suitcase in case Mutti decides to go back to Berlin.

Mutti lies down and opens a book. I do the same. When a bell clangs, we find the dining room by following everyone else. We stand in line waiting for food, which is served on trays we push along a counter. It looks as if everyone gets a plop of mashed potatoes covered by brown gravy with meat chunks. I am hungry and wonder if I can get more. We sit on a bench at one of the long rectangular tables facing a square-jawed, blond man with large hands.

"I am a carpenter," he says. His German has a sing-song accent and sounds

funny. He empties a full glass of milk in one gulp and smiles at the small blond woman next to him who nods. "My Anja knows how to sew and will work as a seamstress." He kisses her forehead. They are lucky to have each other. I feel left out. I wish Mutti had someone to be happy with. Maybe in America she will find him. I hope he will like me too.

"A man with tools can always find work; mine are always by my side." He bends down and holds up a worn black-leather case, "I keep them under my pillow at night." He looks around the room and whispers that people steal, and tools are valuable. I picture what's in my suitcase and can't imagine what anyone would steal -- maybe my amber bead necklace or the inscribed silver spoon from my Ert grandparents. Anyway, he probably means that men steal. I peek at a short red-haired girl across from me. Lots of freckles cover her nose and cheeks.

"My brother lives in San Francisco and will get me a job in the shoe factory where he works. He already talked to his boss and it's all set," says a chunky man next to Ali, stabbing a carrot with his fork so it won't escape.

"We're also going to San Francisco. My name is Helga, and this is my daughter Eva. She is 11, turning 12 in November." Eva is the one I've been exchanging glances with. I am eager to talk to her, especially since she's only one month older than I am and I heard her ask for salt in German.

"I don't know what I will do in America. We are refugees from Germany and from Amsterdam. We were hidden in a convent by very kind nuns during the war." Helga looks at Eva. "We almost stayed at the convent. Life is so peaceful there,

but my daughter deserves a chance to experience life." Helga looks very fashionable, in a slim navy -blue dress with shoulder pads, a single strand of pearls, a blue handbag and blue suede shoes. I didn't know convent people dress so well. I wonder what a convent is.-

After dinner, Mutti and Helga decide to go for a walk around the building. Eva and I follow. We watch their high heels sink into the soft ground. Eva tells me she collects wildflowers; and since June is a good month for flowers, I may help her tomorrow.

As I lie on my bunk at night, I hear whispered conversations from all corners. I try to push away images of our Berlin apartment. I miss not having Pitti crowding me on the narrow bunk. Now she's licking Sonja's hand instead of mine. I loved to rub my hand over her wet black nose. Thinking of her makes me smile as I fall asleep.

I am running along a narrow hall. The sound of boots follow me. I think I know who wears them but am afraid to turn around. I run. Faster. I can't turn back because boots with large white teeth will snap me. Papa, I shout, knowing he won't answer. "Help," I am almost at the water's edge. One more step.

"Are you all right?" Mutti is shaking my arm. "You were thrashing about. I thought you'd fall on my head. You woke me up." Her blond hair is uncombed, and

there is a deep crease down one side of her face.

"I'm sorry. I had a nightmare," I whisper, and rub my eyes. Bright sunlight floods through our neighbor's blue sheet.

In the dining room, I spot Ali and set my food tray between him and Eva. He is buttering a thick piece of dark bread and passing red jam to Eva. A large black book is beside her. I open it and am surprised by the large black cross in the middle of the page.

"Aren't you Jewish?" I blurt, embarrassed by my rudeness at opening her book uninvited.

"Yes we are, but while we were hidden in the convent, mother dressed like a nun, and I was supposed to be an orphan who'd lost her parents in a house fire. When authorities questioned us, that was our story. The nuns protected us. We had to attend church all the time. Now I'm more familiar with the Catholic religion than the Jewish one; and when we're in America, we will convert." She tugs at Helga's sleeve, "Right, Mother?"

"Yes, dear," she answers, refusing a cigarette Mutti offers her. I scold myself for thinking that converting is not a bad idea. Just choose another religion, then you are not an outcast. It's something to think about. Anyway, I am half Lutheran. It would not be a lie. Why do I have to be Jewish? But I see flashes of Uncle Herbert, my Ert grandparents, my relatives torn from life. What an ungrateful girl I am for even thinking about it. What would Papa say? I regret not having known him long enough to remember more about him, but I don't think he would convert. In my

mind he has taken on a new reality. What would our family life be like otherwise? We'd probably not go to America. He would take me to the park, just he and I, father and daughter. He would confide in me, as he had done before he left. Life would be so different. I am sad for the life that should be mine. I want more memories of him. He's in Italy... with a new child. I may never speak to him again....

"And then I don't open that particular page for at least seven days to make sure the flower is cured." Eva has been showing me how she presses and arranges flowers by color in the bible. I pretend to pay attention but it's hard to tear my thoughts away from the past.

After breakfast we walk on the gravel semicircle that surrounds a round, gray, bullet-marked fountain. We head for the center strip filled with high grass and dotted with field flowers. A gardner pushes a wheel-barrow past us, and an elderly man, using an umbrella like a cane, tips his cap in our direction. Suddenly it rains while the sun is shining in my face. Eva sticks the Bible under her skirt to keep it from getting drenched, and we crouch under an old horse buggy filled with soil and mulch, whose wheels have sunk deep into the ground.

"I think it will pass quickly," she says, wiping her face dry on her skirt. "It's just a rain shower to keep the flowers happy, my father used to say."

"Where is your father? Was he hidden with you in the convent?"

"No," Eva says. "He was picked up at work by the Nazi's in January of 1943. We lived in Frankfurt. I've never known what happened to him ... but I don't want to know. I'm sure that he suffered. I like to think that God took him, and he's in

heaven watching me." She wipes both eyes with her hands.

"Sometimes I feel really watched," I say. "But how did you and your mother escape? It must have been hard to get to Amsterdam. It's so far from Frankfurt."

"Yes... it is far, and our escape was a miracle. First we stayed with friends of father's. They took us out to the country to farmers they knew. We traveled around the country on a cart, hidden under hay. We were covered by a large box with air holes to protect us from the weight of hay. Then another farmer kept us for a time until curious neighbors got too interested. That was a close call...." Her voice trails off, and she closes her eyes while her lips move. I think she is praying. I won't ask other questions; I don't want her to think I'm nosy.

The shower passes quickly. When we crawl outside, colors of the rainbow sparkle in the spray of the fountain. The sun is very bright. Flies and tiny insects buzz around my hair as we nudge each other. "Maybe our loved ones are smiling at us," she says, swatting at a fly. "I'll tell you a secret if you give me your word to not tell."

"I'm not going to tell anyone," I say.

"My mother wants to get married in America."

"Does she know a man?"

"No," she giggles. "She promised me that I have to approve of him or she won't marry him." We sit down on a mossy stone and visualize what Eva's new father should look like. Then we collect our flower specimens and spend a pleasant day together.

My heart pounds like a machine. I am terrified because I feel the ship is sinking. I slide to the edge with other bodies. Crashing water chases me. I must jump into the dark, angry foam.

I wake up lying on the hard wood floor next to Mutti's chair. It takes me a moment to realize that I am safe and not in the ocean. It was only a bad dream, I realize with relief, because I don't swim well. In my dream we were forced to abandon ship and I jumped and knocked against Mutti's makeshift nightstand, crowded with a glass of water, a bottle of pills, and her book. Water is dripping on my face, and my leg really hurts. I look around me and feel silly. Mutti says that nothing is broken because I can stand up. Still, it hurts to pull my pants on.

The day looks radiant, just like July should be, with a clear, high blue sky and a brilliant sun shining through the blue sheet. It looks as if the weather is celebrating our departure for America. Mutti reads today's newspaper during breakfast because July seven is a momentous day for us. The paper mentions that the "General Hahn," an American transport ship, is taking on immigrants from Poland, other Eastern European countries and German victims of fascism. It will depart this afternoon for the 10 day voyage to New York.

Two hours later the taxi drops us off at the dock filled with crowds of people. The ship is huge -- bigger than a house -- and gleams brilliantly white against the glistening blue sea. Immense cartons are lifted by tall cranes onto the ship. Although Mutti says that our trunks must be among them, I can't imagine that we'll ever see

them again. I grip the handle of my suitcase, afraid to set it down. Ali has his back turned to me, his reddish-blond hair glints in the sunshine. I am glad we are together. He faces me and smiles. His bright blue eyes light up with pleasure. No concerns – just lots of energy for a great new adventure. Ropes separate ship passengers from visitors. The visitors push bunches of flowers or baskets of fruit in the arms of people with luggage. No one is here to say goodbye to us. I shiver despite the warmth of the weather. Clutching Mutti's arm tightly, I cautiously limp along the boards of the "General Hahn" and watch the heels of the man in front of me. Higher and higher I climb, until my feet land on the ship. A uniformed man looks at my papers and stamps them. Then he faces me and smiles.

"Good luck," he says. Mutti interprets. I've just heard my first American words from an American man. We join an assembly of women, and the American tells us to follow him to a crowded elevator. It seems to descend forever.

Our cabin is tiny, without any windows and only one gloomy light overhead. Ali went somewhere with the men, Mutti says. He has to report to the kitchen for duty. I saw that he is wearing his brand new crepe-soled shoes, of which he is very proud. I hope he can find the kitchen. Narrow staircases lead to narrow hallways. We are told one set of stairs leads down to the shower room. Another set leads up to the mess hall, and others lead to places I will never see. The ship is an American military transport used in the war. Men and women all wear navy or white uniforms. I imagine that's how all Americans dress in America. I climb up to my bunk bed to stay out of the way. Women peek into our cabin. When they realize that

it is full they walk on. Mutti says she will find Eva's mother.

She returns quickly saying that we have to find the top deck because the ship will leave the dock soon and we have to see Bremen for the last time.

I slide off the bunk wincing and climb many staircases to the mobbed deck. Broad smiles are on every face. Eva and her mother find us. Helga pulls a silk scarf from her purse and ties up her hair to protect it from the wind.

"She always looks just right, doesn't she?" I whisper to Mutti. She nods, her face covered by flying hair. An uproar of voices hums as the ship sputters to life. Passengers are waving hands and shouting last messages. Ribbons and balloons flash in the air. The dock is crowded with people waving hats and handkerchiefs.

I wave and wave without knowing why.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE GOLDEN WEST

Passengers lean against the railing, staring into the water like a fortune teller stares into her crystal ball. They line the rails, elbow to elbow, which I am afraid to do, for fear that someone might push me between the rails into the swirling foam below. By now I no longer notice the constant engine shudder, diminished by loud foreign languages fighting to be heard. It is close to one o'clock when Eva and her mother pass, arms linked, faces flushed.

"Hallo," I call. They turn towards me. "Can I stroll with you?" I ask.

"Where is your mother?" Helga asks, fingering her pearl necklace. I need a pearl necklace too, I think. She looks good rolling beads between two fingers. "We wanted to eat lunch with you two."

"She's reading a book in the sun," I say. "Let's surprise her." I don't feel very well," I tell them. "My stomach is queasy."

The mess hall is full of bodies. I wish I were taller so my face wasn't always in a stranger's stomach. We wait in line, pushing past strange-looking food. I point to a creamy bowl. The smiling man behind the counter takes one piece of white bread, a green leaf and a round scoop of green spotted cream and another slice of bread. He

hands me the plate saying something about fish, which I don't understand. A glass of milk and an apple fill my tray, which I carry to a silver metal stand. One foot rests on the chrome plate while I chew the tiny bits of crunch in my sandwich. It tastes good, but next time I'll try the yellow slices that Eva chose for her sandwich. I do wish we could sit down.

"During the war, the kitchen nuns boiled tulip bulbs for us when they ran out of potatoes, and I didn't mind them. Right mother?"

"You were very obedient Eva," she answers, stroking her head. I wonder what I could say to make Mutti stroke my head. We find our way back upstairs after lunch, climbing narrow steps two at a time. We circle the deck to gulp fresh air and watch gulls swoop overhead. It's hard to ignore my nausea. In the distance, waves rise skyward, spraying foam before falling in a fury. Benches are packed with old ladies bundled in dark wool shawls, sitting very close to one another. Families are spread on blankets as if on the beach. I think the whole ship population is on deck. There is even an ice cream window, but we don't have any money. We were told with our immigration instructions to only bring 10 dollars to America. I watch a girl, covered by a red rose-flowered shawl, lick a yellow cone and wonder how so many children can afford ice cream. It looks like the best ice cream I've ever seen, dribbling little rivers of yellow cream over her hand as she flicks her tongue with relish.

Even though my head is under my pillow, I hear a woman cry in the night. I

think she's in bunk seven. I wouldn't mind crying either, but the ship moves up and down a lot and the wall next to me groans like a whale with a toothache. It distracts me. I'm sorry I ate something with fish in it. It doesn't taste good now, when I have to use the pail Mutti gave me. The lady cries all night. Her moans are muffled, but I hear her every time I wake up to vomit.

In the morning, Mutti shows me where the shower room is, and tells me to go and wash. I have never seen a naked woman's body before. I have only gotten a quick glimpse of Mutti because she always tells me to turn around when she undresses. I try not to stare, and turn the blue knob. Ice cold needles spray water all over me. I turn the red knob, and now it's much too hot. I wish I were in a bath. Once the water is regulated, it feels good to be splashed everywhere, especially on my hair. Being surrounded by females is a good feeling. Different sizes and shapes, spreading soap with washcloths. I don't mind the shower anymore. I am jealous that Eva has swelling breasts and fuzz where I have nothing. Being one month older than me can't make that big a difference. Maybe next month I will look like her. I soap my flat chest and imagine what it will feel like to have mounds.

Using the toilet is very embarrassing. A male soldier pushes his wet mop over the tile, while other women and I use the stalls. There are no doors. I hope bathrooms in America have doors.

The odor of frying bacon floats along the corridor toward me, but I have less and less interest in food. Even buttered toast from breakfast doesn't stay with me. I

rush upstairs to the top deck and breathe in cold air for a while and hope the nausea will pass. The wind whips my cotton trousers around my legs, and I find a stairway and sit down. Passengers spill into every corner of the deck. They talk and play cards, passing around sheets of newspaper. Just beyond me, Mutti and Helga settle themselves in two comfortable lounges. I move closer to them as Helga pats Mutti's arm.

"Of course I don't think you were silly to have the operation. Quite the opposite. You'll have no trouble getting another man," says Helga.

"I didn't want another man," says Mutti.

"Of course," Helga agrees nodding. "That's the problem, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"But from what you've told me, he was wrong for you from the start. Two years older than your son." She shakes her head. "Hard odds to overcome, even for an attractive woman like you."

"He did say that he might follow me to New York!"

Cold dew drips on me from an overhang. I realize that I'm in the way, after three soldiers in white uniforms shake their head at me. The best thing about leaving Berlin was leaving Franz behind, so his bad moods couldn't ruin our days anymore. Now Mutti says he will follow us. That's bad news for me. I thought I'd have more attention from her in America. My eyes follow a mother and child bundled in large sweaters, munching on brown cookies. I wonder why they can eat while the bitter taste in my mouth overwhelms me. Waves crash and spray,

pitching me forward on the deck of the ship going to the "Golden West." Two men paint the ship walls white around a square window. They talk to each other in Polish, at least I think so. Ali chose kitchen duty, instead of painting. The paint odor is very strong, and I rush to the opposite side of the ship overlooking endless water, crowned with white caps. Waves tumble over each other to reach our side of the ship and make it rock without end. Blue sky meets water without demarcation, as if the ocean is a mirror to heaven. I wonder if the same sun still shines on Berlin and on Papa in Italy. Now he'll be further away from me than ever.

Whatever is in my stomach comes back up, spraying my clothing. Others around me are doing the same thing. Nine days like this and I will be dead. In the evening while Mutti plays cards with Helga and other women in a recreation room, Eva and I rush to the deck and watch the moon appear. I concentrate on the horizon where sky and water become one to avoid seasickness. We dream of America and what our life will be like in the new country, as the surface of the water catches the moon and plays ball with the waves. Bounce and dip, bounce and dip....

On day three Mutti takes me to the ship infirmary to treat my nausea. The white room echoes with a baby's wail. His distraught mother says he has had a burning fever for two days. A white-haired man wearing a black skullcap says his arm has been numb since yesterday morning. The young doctor looks at me with an amused smile when Mutti explains that I can't eat and will die if I don't eat for 10 days. He tells the nurse to pour something in a paper cup for me. I swallow the

brown bubbly liquid.

"Is this Coca Cola?" I ask through gritted teeth, barely audible, because vomit is ready to burst.

"What? What?" he asks, and the nurse tells him what I said.

"Yes," he says. "It will make you feel better." After he examines a boy's throat he turns back to me and says I can leave. I get up and just then the ship heaves, and so do I. All over the doctor's shoes. The nurse takes me to a hospital bed, gives me a pill from a paper cup and hands me a wet washcloth to bite on when I feel nauseous. I fall asleep with a corner of the cloth stuffed in my mouth.

After a few days in the infirmary, I am used to the smell of sickness and disinfectant and munch happily on salt-covered crackers. Mutti and Ali visit me daily and make me walk so I won't get weak. Ali brings me a pail of chicken soup, guaranteed to stay with me, he says. He shows me his shoes and explains that the salt water on the kitchen floor has corroded his thick crepe soles.

Another day Eva comes and places a long string of different colored beads, ending with a small cross in my hands. She says I should hold them while she reads. "Jesus Savior, our Father who art in heaven, bless us," she says, before opening her Bible to read to me. The formal words sound nice. I hope I'm not so sick that I will die. I wonder if that's why she's reading to me.

Days and nights run into each other, equally unreal. For me the difference between the two is that at night the electric lights are dimmed. I wonder how come

Papa went to another country without having to cross an ocean. Mutti should have gone to a closer country, too. Maybe Australia would have been closer to Berlin; I'd rather travel by train than by ship.

Then, one morning before the overhead bright lights come on, Mutti rushes in and wakes me up. "You have to get dressed and come on deck," she says, shaking my shoulder urgently. "We are in America." She pulls my favorite blue long-sleeved sweater over my head, while I step into the skirt. Ali is waiting for us on the deck by the back railing, she tells me, smiling and crying all at the same time. We hurry to the top deck.

"The Statue Of Liberty," calls Ali, over the engine noise, pointing toward a huge green figure with an upraised arm. She stands on an island surrounded by sparkling water. The harbor is full of ships, moving in all directions.

"I see it," I shout, feeling overwhelmed and tiny. Tall, tall buildings glisten to my right and the beautiful statue is to my left. America!

Soon we are caught in a stream of rushing, shoving people, pushing us along until we find ourselves in one of many lines, waiting to go through customs. Behind me is a lady with a round stomach under her long green dress. At times I feel the hard belly against my head. Some force from the back is pushing her forward as we wait our turn. She taps my shoulder and says something I don't understand and lets out a little laugh patting her bulge. Her unpronounceable name is pinned on her dress. Many families have names pinned on their clothing. I wonder why we don't. I still feel the rocking of the ship and can't believe that finally

my feet are on solid ground.

Finally, the man behind a desk looks at my red KZ-labeled passport, which identifies me as a victim of fascism, checks my face against the passport photo, and stamps it twice. We are pushed toward an iron railing, which separates us from the other side. Next to me, a man with a long, curled-up mustache and leather cap carries a large brass urn.

"What is that?" I ask Ali, who hasn't stopped grinning since I first saw him today.

"That is a samovar. Russians use it for making tea." Behind the gate, a crayoned sign with "N. Yee" is held by a short, smiling Asian man. He blocks a kerchiefed heavy woman in layers of black clothing, who's clutching three red roses. The tall blond man in overalls rushes toward us to embrace an equally tall blond man balancing three leather-strapped boxes over one shoulder. Slowly, we make our way to the street toward a white bus labeled "Hias-Joint." Air as hot as an open oven meets me along with honking cars and hordes of pedestrians.

"Just think," Ali whispers to me, "our first steps in the golden west."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

NEW YORK

The bus passes through crowded streets, jammed with people and cars. Through the open window, activities blur past me without seeming real. I feel like someone else has borrowed my skin. She sweats. She sees. She is untouched. A sharp turn and we come to a halt in front of a large building, not far from the harbor where we landed. The bus door swings open, Ali moves forward to make his way down the metal steps, turning back and stretching a hand into the bus to take hold of Mutti's extended arm. Very gallant, but not really like him. Maybe that's his American behavior, I think. I step off the bus and enter a tall building and step into a large white-walled reception room, where metal chairs are placed in rows like in a movie house. We sit down. When our name is called, we are assigned to a dormitory-style room as in Bremen. Ali is told he has to go to the male wing. We are shown the large dining hall before we separate.

Mutti and I are taken to the female wing and get two drawers in a wooden chest. We are as cramped as in Bremen; wicker baskets and large crates are stacked around many bunks. Mutti shrieks when she opens a drawer and sees bugs scurry around.

"I've never seen such scary-looking things!" she exclaims. I decide to leave

my clothes in my suitcase, but must remove my long-sleeved wool sweater immediately, as July in New York is nothing like it is in Berlin. I am very, very hot.

When we meet Ali at the mess-hall table, he reports that huge black bugs are in the men's bathroom and one was even on his bunk.

"Are there bathroom doors?" I ask.

"Yes they have doors," he says impatiently, "only the ship didn't have doors."

"What are we going to do now?" I ask.

They stare at me and shrug their shoulders.

"Sometime tomorrow I'm meeting with an adviser," says Mutti. "I have some phone numbers to call. You've heard me talk about my childhood friend Ruth Honig from the old days," she says to Ali.

"Is she the one who went to Shanghai?" he asks.

"Yes, her husband was smart enough to get them out of Berlin in '39 before it was too late. She lives somewhere in New York."

Mutti takes her wallet out of her handbag and shows Ali a letter with Ruth's phone number. "She wrote me just a few months ago and told me to call her when we arrive. Unfortunately, I don't know how to make a phone call," she sighs, fanning herself with the letter.

"We also know that Berti Freiberg lives in New York. I brought his address and phone number," Ali says. "Won't they be shocked when we call them?" He laughs nervously and swats a fly with the palm of his hand.

A short while later they decide to walk around on the street and get

acquainted with our new neighborhood. The afternoon is boiling hot; the street is loud. Huge buildings loom overhead. They look top heavy, and I wonder what keeps them from falling on me. As we walk, I see that people are dressed in clothing like mine. For some reason I imagined that everyone in America dressed in military clothing. I even pictured American children in miniature army uniforms. I notice a little boy babbling to an adult, and mention to Ali that even a child as small as he can already speak English. He tells me that I am a goose.

Mutti insists that I hold her hand at all times, which I am relieved to do, especially when we cross a street between screeching cars. I peek through the window of a large restaurant. Different choices are in every bin, while customers slide a tray as we did on the ship. Large chunks of red watermelon on chopped ice look especially appealing, along with beautiful colored fruit slices. I feel like I can taste the texture with my eyes. Cool air floats through an open door touching my hot cheeks, but the door slams shut too soon. At the corner, a vendor sells cigarettes and newspapers to customers lined up in the glaring sun. Mutti says she can't wait to buy her first pack of Chesterfield cigarettes.

We wander the streets, and I see men who lie on the pavement and in doorways. They hold bottles in their hands. One man, lounging in a doorway of a shuttered store, has empty bottles lined all around him. I've never seen such a sight. Occasionally, someone held on to a lamppost in Berlin and sang loud songs. I remember one day when I still lived on *Wörther Strasse* with Oma, the Bauer girls and I were playing hide and seek, and a bedraggled, dark-haired woman sat on a

stoop before the house in which I was going to hide. She sat with her legs spread wide, exposing soiled underwear and talking to herself. I called the girls over and we stared at her, shocked.

A man with white hair and milky eyes sits on a stool in the middle of the sidewalk, holding up a metal bowl, in which he rattles coins at us. The odor of urine surrounds him like a smelly cloud.

"Mutti," I say, "I think we should go back to Berlin. America is poorer than we are."

"Well,... so far, I must admit it doesn't look good," she says, while Ali describes the exact characteristics of the huge bugs he saw.

Finally we return to our building and wait for the dinner bell.

Our adviser tells Mutti that we are located in the Bowery of New York. The neighborhood is filled with homeless alcoholics, but they are harmless, she assures Mutti. The good news is that she helped Mutti reach Ruth by phone, and Ruth will visit us on Sunday if her employer doesn't need her. She is a housekeeper for a nice family, she said; but sometimes they need her even on her day off. Mutti is given a small amount of local money, called "dollars." The adviser explains to us the value of each coin and bill, compared to the German mark. We have no German money left. We were probably the only obedient immigrants, as I noticed that in our dormitory women removed many bills from their brassieres when they undressed.

On Sunday morning we take a brief walk after breakfast and are surprised that only the alcoholics are on the street. Ali meets a man from his dormitory and asks why the street is so empty. The man explains that we are located in the financial section of New York and all the business buildings and stores are closed on Sunday.

"People don't live here; they just work here," the man says.

We sit on the warm front steps of the building to wait for Ruth. When a woman wearing a red-and-white striped skirt and ruffled white blouse turns the corner, Mutti waves and tells us, "It's her."

"Welcome, welcome to New York," she says.

"Hello Frau Honig," I say, shaking her hand.

"Darling, in America, you call everyone by their first name. People are very informal here," she says, patting the blond curls that cover her head. Ruth seems to have no eyebrows of her own, only two black penciled arches that look like she's surprised by everything. I watch Mutti embrace her and see tears in both their eyes. I feel left out and have time to examine Ruth. I wonder if we will look like her when we become American. Ruth says that she will take us to a cafeteria for a cup of coffee. While we walk, she explains New York to us.

"See that traffic light?" She asks. "This is not like Berlin. Oh, no," she chuckles. "You have to move fast at the green. And never cross the street when it's red, not ever."

A siren sounds in the distance, growing louder and more ominous.

"Now when you hear that," she nods, "run as fast as you can and get on the

sidewalk. Don't stop on the street to watch, or they'll drive right over you. They have to. They must catch a thief or murderer, so they can't slow down for you." She swings her black patent-leather handbag in the direction of an on-coming car, "America is fast. You have to move quickly here." After a short walk, she passes through a door and tells us that we are now in a cafeteria.

"Take a tray and follow my lead," she directs.

I point to watermelon resting on crushed ice and follow her to a table, collecting silverware on the way. It tastes delicious. Cold and crunchy, with tiny black eyes. Much sweeter than in Berlin.

"My employer will come and pick me up at 5:30," she says, as I peek at a young couple kissing each other at a corner table, "and he will take us for a ride to show you the real New York."

Punctually, Mr. Berger, in green slacks and a short-sleeved shirt, comes in the late afternoon, driving a long gray car. He greets us in English, which Ruth interprets. We climb into his car, completely awed. The interior is shiny and smells of leather. Mesmerized, I look out of the window as the car rolls quietly past rectangles of green parks and spiky borders of skyscrapers. Ruth lapses into English with Mr. Berger, turning to us in the back seat, saying, "Didn't I tell you that New York is amazing?"

We are approaching an area called Times Square, Ruth explains. The lights of the city flicker all around. The view through the front windshield makes me feel as if we are driving into a tunnel of electricity. Never have I seen so many lights, not

even the beautiful merry-go-round that we visited in *Kurfürstendam* can't compare.

"To be an American," I whisper to Mutti, "must be something wonderful."

"I wonder if they know it," she says somberly.

After our marvelous ride Sunday evening, Monday morning seems hot and drab. During our morning walk, I stumble over a crushed green bottle, lying in the curb. Mutti says she saw pretty dresses in the window of a department store called "Wanamaker." The store is a paradise of treasures. Pearls, rings, perfumes, mountains of shoes, handbags, blouses and scarves cover tables right in the store's aisles. In Berlin, goods are only seen from behind a sales counter, with a snooty sales person making sure that you are a serious customer before you can touch merchandise. Here, I can finger everything without obligation. A red, green and white-striped sandal catches my eyes. I pull, and two shoes tied together by a string are in my hand. Mutti says that I can try them on. They don't fit, but an identical pair does. She buys me my first pair of American shoes for \$1.99.

That evening, Ali reaches Berti Freiberg. For a short while, he worked with Ali at the club in Berlin until he immigrated to New York in 1948. Berti tells him that he knows of a boarding house on 98th Street, where other German immigrants rent rooms. He will let us know if one is available, and will take us there if they have a vacancy. He calls us back shortly and reports that, luckily, they have room for us. Mutti says we'll take the room, sight unseen, as getting around is complicated for us. Rent will be \$38 a month for one furnished room, with kitchen privileges and

use of the communal bathroom. After Mutti meets once more with the adviser, she is given a sum of money, and we are on our own in New York City. Mutti shows the cab driver the address, and we whiz along many streets until he stops in front of a brown, narrow brick house.

"Folks, you are planted between West End Ave. and Broadway, very convenient," the chatty cab driver says, after telling Mutti how much she owes him.

A smiling, white-haired lady comes down the front steps and greets us in Yiddish. She is not easy to understand, but since Mutti's English is not very good, she appreciates Mrs. Horowitz's effort. Her grown son, Justin, helps us unload the yellow Checker cab and leads us to a black, frilly, wrought-iron elevator.

"This is Ida," he says, pointing to a red-haired, smiling fat lady who sits on a stool and yanks a switch to move the elevator up and down. Her eyes have heavy lids, as if she's about to doze. I understand why she looks the way she does because she sits in a small, windowless cage. When she stops on the third floor, Justin leads us to the first room on the left. He says that shortly he expects a single-room vacancy and that Ali can have it. Justin also says that August is a very hot month in New York, and he will lend us a small table fan.

Finally, we are alone. Ali stands in the middle of the gray, linoleum-covered floor and lets out a long thin breath. Mutti sits down on a large bed and cocks her knees as she lights a cigarette. Justin says that the couch pulls out to sleep two people. I pull one of four chrome chairs up to the brown table, brushing old bread crumbs off the faded, red upholstery.

The room is very hot. Mutti asks me to please open the window. I open it wide and look out, but all I see is a row of dented trash cans.

Ali says that before he unpacks, we need a newspaper, so he and Mutti can start looking for jobs.

Outside, New York swelters. Waves of heat blow across the pavement. We walk a few feet to the corner of Broadway, where a grocery store called "Busy Bee" doesn't sell newspapers. They direct us to a narrow shop next to the "Cake Master" bakery. On the way, we stop and stare into the window of an appetizing store. The signs says "Bolotovky's." Dried peach halves and moist dark prunes are heaped behind the glass. A wood barrel of pickles and a twin barrel of sauerkraut decorate the entrance like watch dogs. A small muscular-looking man is cutting thin slices of pink fish filet. Everything in that store makes me salivate. We walk on to buy The Daily News and a pack of cigarettes before returning to our room. In the middle of the brown table is a small fan spinning hot air.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A NEW LIFE BEGINS

It is Sunday. The air outside feels like a heavy, wet blanket. We leave our room to use the subway on 96th Street for the first time. Mutti holds a full page of instructions to Washington Heights that Ruth gave her over the pay phone on our floor. Using the subway is terribly scary; but fortunately, there are only two directions one can go, and Ruth's directions are explicit. To our surprise we actually arrive at her apartment door.

Ruth introduces us to her boyfriend, Al, and shows us her efficiency apartment, decorated mostly in red, black and gold. I glance at everything but can't wait until we eat. Her dining-room table, which stands in the corner of the living room, is laden with food. Al runs his hand through oily black hair and offers Mutti a Camel, which he produces from the pack rolled up in the sleeve of his T shirt. I can tell that Ali is impressed.

"You must be hungry," Ruth says, and invites us to help ourselves to lunch. Ali declines the smoke in favor of a herring rollmops.

"I've always wanted to know why the Jews in Germany wore those yellow stars and waited to be picked up like sheep. I would have fought back; they wouldn't have gotten me," Al nudges Ruth. "Right?"

As I hear him say this, a shadow passes over me -- one of those floating shadows that engulf me and then speed away. The silence at the table becomes heavy. The clatter of dishes stops.

I gasp. My mouth goes dry, and I look at Mutti. Ruth giggles as if she heard a joke.

"You tell him," says Mutti unsmiling, and nods in Ruth's direction.

"Al insists that I ask you," she chuckles, examining her glistening red fingernails. "Apparently what I've told him is not enough of an answer. He says that I left before the real trouble began... Sorry."

"Well, Al, I too am very sorry, but I don't wish to talk about that today," says Mutti. "It's a long and upsetting story. Today, I really wanted to ask Ruth how she and Max got to Shanghai. Maybe another day. I'm sure we'll see you again." Turning to Ruth, she says, "I really do want to know."

"Oh goodness," Ruth says with a short laugh, curling a pink slice of ham around her fork. "It was another life and a different world we lived in. But Elli, you always said that my Max was a smart man. And you were right. When he applied for a visa to America, the officials at the American Embassy in Berlin told him the 1938 exit quota was filled and we could get on the waiting list. Besides the many needed documents, we also had to produce a good-conduct certificate. Well, good luck," she says sarcastically. "In those days that's like saying don't bother us, find another country, because how does a Jew in Berlin get what they called a such a paper. The certificate had to be gotten from the police department. Sounds simple,

right?" She chuckles. I wonder why she laughs so much, I don't think anything is funny. I help myself to more butter and a thick slice of Swiss cheese.

"And there was another thing. We had to leave within a limited, specific period of time. If ..." she holds up her index finger to make the point, "we couldn't get abroad within a specific time period, Max and I were to appear at Gestapo headquarters three times a day: at six am, noon and ten pm. Regardless of illness or weather, not a minute's delay was excused or we risked who knows what. So, we heard through the grapevine that Shanghai, China," -- "far enough from Germany, isn't it? -- was accepting Jews. However, passengers were not guaranteed a landing in Shanghai, so it was advised that we purchase round-trip tickets."

"You liked the Orient, didn't you?" asks Al, waving his fork at her for emphasis.

Ruth gives a short laugh, startling in its bitterness.

"What was China like?" asks Ali, reaching for another scoop of shrimp salad.

"I could write a book," she grins, "if I could write. It was a hazardous journey, long and complicated, with engine trouble and terrible-sea sickness. It took four weeks, with stops in various ports. When we arrived, Jewish Shanghai leaders met us at the ship. In fact, they met every arriving ship to help the refugees. Life was very hard indeed," she sighs, without a smile. "Shanghai was already overloaded with refugees from many countries, speaking many languages. English was the most practical one to know." Ruth passes Al a corner of bread with ham and Swiss cheese.

"You know I don't like mustard on my bread," he pouts. "Hellman's Mayo,

that's all," he scolds.

"Sorry, sorry," she blushes.

"How did you lose dear Max?" Mutti asks. Ruth glances at Al because he wants everything we say translated.

"We were very poor, but not as poor as our Chinese neighbors. Whole generations lived their lives on Sampan boats, side by side, covering the water. Sanitation was awful -- primitive conditions -- and Max got some kind of a fever. Many Europeans did. There were hordes of flies and mosquitoes. We had no protection against their flies. Max virtually burned up with high fever. A European doctor came and tried to help him, but it was too late. He was cremated, and I was alone. In time, that European doctor became my boyfriend. I needed help, and he was a lonely widower. In Shanghai there was a market for everything -- my camera, Max's watch, his clothing, the Persian lamb coat my mother gave me. It was better to sell the stuff than to watch it mildew. Everything mildewed.... clothing, shoes. It was better to own nothing. If you think it's hot here," she waves her hand, "Compared to Shanghai..." She shakes her head and cups her face with her hands. "Seasonal typhoons dumped water, flooding streets, houses, everything." Ruth is still shaking her head as I ladle sour cream over a helping of herring bits. I hope she will talk a long time.

"Would you pass me a beer?" says Al, apparently tired of playing with a blue rubber band.

"Well, anyway, we put our name on a waiting list for America and Canada

from the start. Finally, after the war ended, I got to come here. Sadly, my doctor friend died shortly before departure of a heart attack. Poor Solly, I think it was the excitement of finally getting a visa that did it. Luckily, I got a job with the Bergers through an employment agency, and now I'm on my own. I used to live with them when their children were small, but now I just do day work." She tweaks Al's muscular arm. "Al is the house engineer; he takes care of everything," she giggles, "including me."

Al, having finished his beer, makes a loud pop, crushing the can flat with one squeeze. Ali rolls his eyes at me and flattens a piece of bread over liverwurst, salami and ham. Ruth starts to stack her plate and Al's; but seeing that Ali started another sandwich, she leaves the plates and excuses herself to make coffee in the kitchen. After coffee and cake, Mutti checks her watch and says it is time for us to go. I feel like a stuffed balloon, rolling myself down the hot street toward the green-painted, subway station.

Once we are seated on the homeward subway, Mutti reprimands Ali and me for eating like gluttons.

"But Mutti," I say, "the food was so good. She wanted us to eat, or why did she serve it!"

"That shrimp salad," Ali sucks air through his teeth which always irritates Mutti.

"I wish I had taken a second helping of ham," I say.

"It seems to me that you had second helpings of everything," she says,

turning to face me.

"Chicken salad with white grapes," sighs Ali. "I'll bet she used lots of lemon in the dressing, it was nice and crisp."

"The best I've ever had," I add, clicking my tongue.

"You two embarrassed me," says Mutti. "You ate like you were vacuum cleaners. She'll never invite us again."

"She can afford it. She works, and she's almost an American citizen," Ali says without guilt.

Ali and Mutti check the daily want ads, anxious to find jobs. Mutti calls from the hall phone. "Yes, I am a waitress, and I speak English," I hear her shout.

"They want me to come to work right away," she says nervously. She pulls a city map out of her purse, and Ali helps her pinpoint the location. She checks her hair in the mirror over the small sink. I wish her good luck. Ali's calls get him an interview at Howard Johnson's, which has an opening for a cook.

I don't feel like staying in our room alone. After washing the breakfast dishes in the communal kitchen, I go into our room and take out a writing pad. "I feel alone," is what I feel like writing to Papa. Once I start reminiscing about our voyage and the people I met, it gets easier. In fact, I write the same letter with different headings to Opa and Tante Gerda in Germany, as well as to Anna and Peter in Israel. I guess Eva and I will never write, because we don't have each other's address. At around six o'clock, I hear people in the kitchen, clattering and laughing. But I'm not

hungry and wait for someone to come home. Mutti is the first one to come home.

"I am exhausted," she says. "Thank God, they have another waitress. I could never have gotten through otherwise." She pulls off her stockings and soaks them in our wash basin. "It's not far from here. You can walk over tomorrow if you like," she tells me. She unwraps bread and slices of sausage, and we eat a sandwich. Long after she is asleep, I hear Ali tiptoe in. Relieved that we are all together, I turn over and cover my head with a pillow.

The next day, I walk with Mutti to her job 22 blocks away.

"Don't come in for at least another hour," she tells me. "Look at the windows and don't get lost."

When a jewelry-store clock shows that an hour has passed, I walk into the stale hot air of the long, narrow room. Its once blue walls have become bluish green with time. Mutti is collecting dishes from a table and motions me to stand in a corner by a highchair. She seems to be everywhere. I watch her wiping tables, collecting bills, taking orders and balancing foamy cups of coffee while scanning the room for hand-waving customers ready to pay.

"I want Bar-B-Queued chicken, not breaded chicken, don't you understand?" an outraged man is shoving a food plate into Mutti's hand. The other waitress comes and talks in soothing tones to the man, who is shaking his head. "I only get an hour for lunch," he shouts.

I can tell that Mutti is close to tears and wish I could help her. I walk past her and wave. I'm not sure she even sees me leave.

I am scared and feel sorry for her as I wander toward home through a maze of honking traffic and hurrying pedestrians. A stout woman hurrying along the pavement behind me bumps into me when I stop abruptly in front of a tall window filled with long-haired, beautiful dolls.

"Excuse please," I say, but she mutters crossly under her breath before continuing on her way. After I cross busy 96th Street, I decide to check out my new school on West End Ave. In only one week school will start.

"Did you have fun?" Ida asks. Her left hand cups her round belly as it jiggles under her loose black dress. Her job seems so easy compared to Mutti's.

"No. May I ride with you a while?" I ask, thinking that maybe I can teach Mutti how to be an elevator operator. I like the steady breeze that flows through the iron bars of the car, even when not in motion.

"Do you like New York?" she asks me, tossing her head back and letting the dim glow of the overhead bulb highlight her powdered face.

"Not really," I say. "I liked the food at Ruth's house though; it was delicious."

"It takes time," she says. "Patience and time."

I stand close behind her, slightly higher than her bright, red hair and inhale her heavy, strong-smelling floral perfume. It fills my nostrils. Through the elevator noise, a little song seems to beat in my brain with monotonous intensity, "*Pack die Badehose ein...*" ("Pack your bathing suit ...") Finally I am tired of standing and get off on the third floor to enter our room, using the key around my neck. Eventually,

Mutti comes home with a cone-shaped bag of hot potato sticks for me.

"They are called french fries, and they go with a hamburger," she says, unwrapping a bun stuffed with brown meat and pickle slices.

"I like pickles," I say.

"I got fired from the deli," she says sadly. "The boss said my English isn't good enough. And it isn't. They have so many different kinds of sandwiches, I'll never remember them all. Hot corned beef, lean corned beef, pastrami, salami. It's so confusing." She spills coins out of a paper bag. "My tips for the day," she says. "You can help me roll coins into little tubes."

The next day Mutti spreads the newspaper across the table, and I look over her shoulder at all the circles she has made. She calls a want ad for an evening waitress job. I hear her say, "Yes, yes, my English is good. Yes, I can start tonight."

She prepares our dinner in the kitchen, with two other ladies crowding the stove. I help dry our dishes and stack them on our shelf in the large cupboard. In our room I watch her close the small buttons of her white blouse. She tells me to go to bed. What I want more than anything in the world is for Mutti to leave the lamp on, so I won't be alone in the darkness. But electricity costs money, and we have none. The time until she comes home is unthinkable long.

"Good night Vivi."

"Good night Mutti."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

SCHOOL DAYS

The bed is narrow in the huge room. I cannot see the end. A bright light hovers above, although I lie in darkness. A mirror appears and my reflection is stretched there grotesquely. My ears and nose are elongated. Bright eyes watch me. They blink. I must protect him from the eyes. "Where are you," I try to shout with my clenched mouth. Suddenly, I become aware that I am not alone. Someone else moves about in the room. Very quietly.

"Who's there?"

"Shsh... it's me. I just got home from work," says Ali, "sorry I woke you."

"Ohh ... that's all right. I like to wake up when I have a bad dream. Is Mutti home?"

"No, her bed is still empty. I hope she doesn't get fired again," he says, toweling his hair and combing it back straight. "I heard that school starts for you tomorrow; you'd better get some sleep. And good luck. Oh, by the way, I'm moving to my own room on Saturday. It's on this floor. Well, good night."

"Good night," I turn to the wall and pull the covers over my head, wishing Mutti were home. I hear the sound of flushing water from the bathroom next door. It is next to my head.

The moment my eyes open I think of the new school where I will see hundreds of American children, without knowing even one. I hope they won't judge me by my clothes, but I know that they probably will. After a toast-and-jam breakfast, I stand in front of our single closet, facing a row of my familiar dresses and blouses. Unfortunately, none of them look very American. Crammed on the overhead shelf are winter boots and our down comforters, which have an unpleasant mildew odor since our voyage to America. I can't imagine when we'll need them. I've never felt so hot in Berlin as here. I select my striped sandals from Wanamakers but can't decide on a dress. Maybe, I should wear the colorful print one trimmed with blue ribbon around the armhole... I like the short-sleeved pink sweater with hardly any stains, but it's too warm for today. I settle on a light blue blouse -- my favorite color -- and the navy skirt, even though it is wool.

Walking to school, familiar fear fills my stomach like a nest of unruly worms. I clutch the envelope Mutti gave me with damp hands. My skirt sticks between my legs as I walk, slower and slower. I hope no one will look at me. The red brick school building is gray with years of accumulated grime. The huge complex occupies a whole square block. I enter the same office Mutti took me to in the middle of August and hand the tiny lady behind the desk my papers. She smiles and motions me to follow her.

"Hello sixth grade," she says, addressing a sea of staring eyes. "I want to introduce you to a special student from Germany. She speaks very little English, and I want everyone to make a special effort to be kind and helpful."

Faces blur before me, and I wipe my sweaty hands in the folds of my skirt as the lady's finger points past the American flag to a chair-desk combination in the front row. I blush in rolling waves and feel as if my insides are boiling. I sit down and make a fist, digging nails into the fat part of my hand for courage. I imagine everyone's eyes are examining my back.

"All right class, let's continue. "Hunter, Kate?"

"Here."

"Taft, Betty?"

"I'm here."

"I want to welcome you all to your last year of elementary school. From here you will " I am already lost. She's saying words I don't understand. I should be entering the seventh grade; but because I don't speak English, the school placed me in the sixth grade. I don't know what difference it makes because I won't understand anything, anyway.

Everyone stands up and places one hand over their heart. Then they all speak together. I, too, place my hand, but say nothing. The morning passes while I manage to stare at the teacher's name, Mrs. Fleischer, written in white charcoal on the blackboard. Strange, smooth-sounding voices are all around me. "They are lucky," I think to myself. They belong to a great country, speak English and are well-dressed. One day I hope I can feel like I, too, belong here. But not yet. During a break between classes, there is loud whispering and notes pass from desk to desk. Someone throws a spitball, which lands near my chair. I don't turn around, because I'm afraid that it

was aimed at me. At some point, the dark-haired teacher, wearing a floral dress cinched by a black belt, writes numbers, pluses and dashes on the blackboard. At last, I do understand something. But not much.

When the lunch bell rings, the class rushes to the door. I stay seated, feeling stupid and uncertain as to where I should go. A girl with flickery brown eyes stands at my desk and says, "Hi, my name is Rebecca. I'm called Becca. I speak a little Yiddish, and I'll try to help you. Are you hungry?"

"Yes," I nod and pull my small brown paper bag out of the desk. She is talking fast, and I don't understand her Yiddish very well, but I smile a lot to show appreciation. I love her crinkly petticoat, which makes her dress stick out like an umbrella. One piece of the hem is caught up to expose the frilly, snow-white slip -- It enchants me. One day I'd like to have an outfit like that. She tells me something about her younger brother, which I can't understand, and says she will invite me to her house for her birthday party.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Vivi," I say. Becca wrinkles her nose.

"Wee Wee is your name?"

"Yes," I nod.

"Wee Wee means pee pee," she says. "You know, like when you go to the bathroom? Don't you have any other name?"

"No," I say, "just Vivi or Vivian."

"That's much better," she says. When two other girls join her, she introduces

me as Vivian. I start eating my yellow cheese sandwich, relieved to not have to talk. The other girls eat food from a sectioned tray. We return to class. When a bell finally rings at three o'clock, everyone rushes out the door to the cloudy street.

I walk home past the tall buildings, wondering what the others learned and if any homework was assigned. In Berlin, most children carried a backpack; but I see that here, the girls clutch many books to their chest. The boys and girls look stronger, taller and healthier.

"How was school?" asks Ida.

"Oh, I felt as if I'm in a sheer bubble -- able to see everything but kind of helpless because I can't respond. The kids probably think I'm stupid and my name means pee pee." I answer.

"Yea, in English it doesn't sound as good as in German. Don't take it personally. Americans are very nice people. They'll like you once you learn English, but I know the feeling. You feel almost invisible, like a shadow. Ja, Ja, that's just how I felt when I was green." She sees how puzzled I look. 'Green' is what new immigrants are called, and a 'green Kraut' is a German immigrant."

"Good afternoon, Ida," says a dark-haired woman in a wet rain-coat, as she enters the elevator from the lobby.

"Hello, have you met Vivi from the third floor, Frau Neumann?"

"Yes, indeed. Nice to see you again." Turning to Ida, she says, "Don't forget that tomorrow night is 'The Milton Berle Show.' The elevator door opens. "You can come too, Vivi. It starts at eight." She waves her hand in my direction.

"What is she talking about?" I ask.

"I'm glad she invited you. Now you can watch television in her room every Tuesday and Saturday night. That's when she and her husband Paul invite people from the house to watch television."

Since the only television I've seen is in a store window on Broadway, I really look forward to tomorrow night.

"I'm hungry. Can I bring you something?" I ask.

"No thanks. See you later."

The next morning I choose a long, wool jumper, because my skirt was too short yesterday. I'd like to wear the green dress with appliqued white grapes, but it looks too different, although I feel guilty ignoring it, because Tante Gerda worked hard to make it. At least I can get to school earlier than yesterday to avoid facing the seated classroom again.

Becca looks pretty in a yellow vest with a matching skirt. Her friend, Jane, wears a ruffled, blue dress with white socks and perfect-looking shoes. All of my socks are striped. I saw no other girl wearing striped socks, only boys seem to wear red, blue and green socks.

Most of the pretty girls wear their hair pulled back in a ponytail with colorful ribbons. Even Mrs. Fleischer's hair is worn up, wound tight and fastened in a ball at the back of her head. Mine is too short. If I don't cut it, I too can wear a short tail. Maybe by winter.

"Do you know any German songs?" Becca asks me for the teacher, Mrs.

Fleischer.

"Maybe she can sing for us sometime," she says to Becca.

I tell Becca that I miss reading books. Mine have been read and reread. She takes me to the library on 100th Street. She fills out a card for me and tells me that I can take out three books anytime I want. When I return them in two weeks, I can take another three. She finds the German-language section, and I choose a thick book about Greek mythology. The gray-haired librarian says that she will have more German books the following week. I return the next day to practice checking out books. Much of my time on Saturdays is spent retreating to the library's hard chairs, looking at pictures in American magazine's, and hiding from my new life.

Every morning, I must choose something to wear, make a sandwich, face the day. Mutti asks me about school, but we always end up talking about her job. Trying to get the orders straight while rushing between the kitchen and dining area is draining her energy, she says. I'd like her to sit with me and put her arms around me. But she says that her parents didn't hug and kiss her when she was a child, and she always finds a reason to push me away. Either she is too tired, or it's too hot, or I'll wrinkle her blouse.

She responds when I tell her funny things about girls at school. I like to make her laugh. When she laughs, her eyes crinkle and don't look sad.

On the second Sunday in October, just after my 12th birthday, Ali's friend Berti Freiberg invites us to his apartment on 73rd Street for coffee and cake. Our

elevator is out of order. As we walk down the stairs, breakfast smells hang in the air; bacon on the second floor and burned butter on the first. Instead of taking the bus, Mutti says we can walk to save the fare. I like the quiet street today with fewer pedestrians and less traffic than usual. Mutti looks pretty, wearing a brand-new, chocolate-brown dress with a wide skirt.

We find the house and are on time at one o'clock. I've never met Berti and am looking forward to the afternoon. A paunchy little man with a stubby beard opens the door and introduces himself as Willi, Berti's father. I don't know what I expected, but am disappointed when a bestacled, skinny, young man embraces Ali. The apartment has creaky dark floors and smells of cigarette smoke. Berti serves coffee after showing us the one-bedroom apartment. He insists on demonstrating how the pull-out couch works. Willi comes from the kitchen with Napoleon's. One has a lit candle, which he places before me. He says that I should blow out the candle and make a wish, because whatever I wish for will come true. As I stare at the candle, I don't know which wish to make; to look and sound American, make life easier for Mutti or to see Papa again. Finally, I wish for Papa.

After a while, the conversation turns to how Willi escaped the Nazis in Germany, after his wife's death in 1935, when Berti was nine years old.

"I hired a housekeeper, Herta Wüschler, to take care of my son and fortunately she was a kind, woman. In 1937, I arranged passage for us to Shanghai. As a Jew, I was afraid to stay in Berlin any longer. The night before our departure, Berti got very sick." He looks at his son affectionately: Ashes scatter down his stomach from the tip of his cigarette. "Rheumatic fever was the cause. Herta urged

me to go. She said she would keep him as her own, and tell neighbors that he was her younger brother." Pinching a speck of tobacco from his tongue, he nods in Berti's direction to continue the story.

"After father left, things got worse and worse in Berlin. I know I don't have to tell you that. So, anyway, I stayed with Herta and her daughter Lotte. She told neighbors that I was her sister's son, the only survivor from a house fire in Frankfurt. Shortly after Herta lost her husband in the war, our apartment house was bombed. We still hadn't heard from my father." He pauses to help himself to another cup of coffee, accepting the sugar bowl from me. "That was tough. I thought I'd never see him again." There is a long, long silence. "We moved in with a family Herta knew, and I grew up with Lotte as if we were brother and sister." Eying the three cake slices left on the platter, I take another Napoleon slice and avoid Mutti's side ward glare.

"Anyway, in 1949, shortly after I met Ali at the "Blue White Club," my permission to immigrate to America was granted. I was lucky, and got a well-paying desk job with Mr. Strobe, an importer of German products. I regularly read the German language newspaper here, called "*Aufbau*," ("Rebuild,") and I started to place weekly ads asking about the whereabouts of my father. I included the name of the ship he took and the year he left."

"What a remarkable story," says Mutti.

"It's sort of like a fairy tale, isn't it?" Ali marvels.

"It is even more romantic than you think!" Berti continues, "because the craziest thing was that, this February, I was invited to be on a television show right

here in New York. They wanted me to come and tell my story about Germany. Because I don't have a television, I didn't even know what kind of show it was. So on stage, in front of an audience, they asked about my father and how long it's been since I've seen him. Suddenly, I hear my father's voice getting closer and closer, and then he appears from behind the curtain." Berti and his father look at each other with tears in their eyes. I wipe mine with a tissue.

"And there you have the end of our story, the happy ending," says Berti.

"Amazing," says Mutti, while I wonder if I could contact that show to get me together with my Papa. Would he come? Would he be alone or with Gaby and Mia?

"Well, I have another surprise for you," says Berti. "I've bought a car and will take you for a ride. Ready everyone?"

We walk about two blocks, and he stops in front of a shiny turquoise car. Ironically, he tells us, the brand is called a "Kaiser." With his white handkerchief, he wipes away two water spots on the hood. I am impressed with my brother's apparent knowledge of cars by the way he kicks one of the white-rimmed tires.

"This sure doesn't look like a used car," Ali says. "There is no rust!"

"American cars don't rust," says Berti, and digs through his pockets for the key to open the door.

"Come in; make yourselves comfortable," he says.

For a while we just sit in the car, but the sun shining through the glass is baking us. Finally, I roll down a window.

"You know," Berti says, fixing the rear-view mirror a little straighter, "this is such a good parking spot, and they are hard to find." Turning to us in the back he

says, "If you don't mind, we won't go for a ride. "He clicks the radio on, "How much is that doggy in the window," is playing. "We'll sit in the car and visit."

When I tell Ida about our day, she laughs and says that I had "an immigrant's car ride."

The next day at our lunch recess Becca and her friend, Jane, ask me what I like to do after school.

"I like dull," I say, "and I like to sing."

"Dull," they repeat, looking at each other, barely hiding giggles.

"I sew for dull," I say, motioning with my hands to simulate needle and thread.

"You like dulls?" She repeats. "I don't understand what you are talking about." Becca interrupts and asks me to explain in German. Finally they understand that I like to sew clothes for my dolls. Becca corrects my pronunciation. She says "doll" sounds like "dahl" instead of the way the word is written.

The loudspeaker plays, "God Bless America." All of a sudden, there I am, onstage, blinking into the crowded auditorium filled with students. Everyone is here for the Christmas program. It seems like a thousand faces stare at me. I feel exposed and wonder how I got to be here....

The room is very quiet, save for a few camera shutters clicking in my direction. My voice sounds squeaky in my ears as I sing "La Vie en Rose," a French song in German, followed by Oma's favorite song about blooming white lilacs.

Finally, I hear cheering and clapping. I am relieved that my time in the spotlight is over.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

MOTHER SENDS ME AWAY

As I clean my dinner dishes in the communal kitchen, I think how tired I am of eating Campbell's pea soup with sliced hot dogs! Mutti has no time to cook, and Ali doesn't either. He says that when he's home, he doesn't want to go near a kitchen. So Mutti and Ali eat their meals at work. Since January, Ali has been working at the Regis Hotel, earning 45 dollars a week. He deposits \$25 into his savings account for his future with Sonja and uses \$20 for expenses. Ali plans to go to Berlin this year to get married. He's lucky, because he will see Opa and Tante Gerda again and visit with Pitti and Susie.

Mutti likes her waitress job at the Barbizon Hotel for Women on Lexington Ave. She wears a pink uniform, which I iron for her each week. The job is permanent and offers hospitalization benefits, and Mutti can reach it by taking two buses.

School is not much better for me. I finally had to wear my rabbit coat to school after I caught a cold wearing two layers of sweaters, to avoid having to wear the fur coat.

"What's that?" said Tony, a popular boy in my class, pointing at me and looking perplexed.

"My coat," I said, feeling like a huge, furry monster. I wish I looked like the other girls. Mutti bought herself a new, green jacket with brass buttons; she said it's

called a topper. But I have to wear the rabbit coat. "Maybe next year," she said, when I asked for a new coat.

Learning English on my own is hard, but my ears are slowly getting used to the sound of the American language. I've learned the names of all the colors and tell Becca that her dress is blue or yellow or plaid. "Hi" and "bye" are easy, but after that's said, I don't have much else to say to the other children. I read something in English every day and use my dictionary to look up all the words. The trouble is my pronunciation. German words are pronounced as they are read, unlike English words. Their, there and they're all sound the same, and the different meanings are impossible for me to grasp. It is easier to bury myself in German books about Greek mythology. Zeus, Neptune and Diana the huntress, their anger and passions fill my thoughts while I study the intricate window panels in my classroom.

Becca invited me to her birthday party on the eighth of February. I was embarrassed by my present. No one else gave her candy.

"Oh, how nice, I like Hershey ... I mean, I like sweets," she said when she unwrapped the large chocolate bar I gave her. Then she seemed to be talking to fill the awkward silence. One girl gave her beautiful hair clips and bows, and Jane gave her two Nancy Drew books. I will never bring chocolate again.

I wish Mutti would spend time with me, help me with my confusing schoolwork, offer advice about making friends with the other children, and buy me something American to wear so that I look less odd. Last night, I tried to cuddle with Mutti. My arms slid around her neck and I tried to sit on her lap, but she said that I was too heavy and big, and I reluctantly released her.

I miss Berlin where, at least, I was among people like myself, rather than among strangers who are different from me. I'm not sure why we left Germany. It didn't make sense to Opa or Tante Gerda. I don't hate Germans... I wish they didn't hate me.... I don't think my friend Dieter, Hedda or Lotte hated me, although if Germany had won the war, they would have surely turned into Nazis. Dieter would not have dared to take a beating for me. I would have been a dirty Jew -- not Vivi from the second floor. What made so many Germans follow Hitler? I take a deep breath. My thoughts race along like a speeding train, stopping at various stations. Poor Petra from the summer camp did not feel clean because she was told that Jews smell. Or Martha, surviving and yet never surviving the horrors she'd witnessed. Anna and Peter. They don't want to live in a country that didn't want them, destroyed their parents and their family life. They wrote me a note, but our correspondence is not going well. I can tell that they wish I would stop writing so that they can stop writing me. Mutti can't allow herself to relax with Germans, to trust them. They took our family away to concentration camps, murdered them. Papa had said that Paul Schmidt saved his life. He wasn't Jewish. The Schultzs hid me. They aren't Jewish. My reverie is broken by splashing water sounds from the bathroom.

After eating corned beef sandwiches and cream of tomato soup for dinner, I painted Mutti's fingernails bright red. She is reading the *Daily News*, with the help of a dictionary. I, too, am following the escapades of a bank robber named Willie Sutton. He is an expert at escaping from prison. His latest trick was to dig a tunnel

and leave behind a fake head to fool prison guards when they made a nightly head count. I even wrote Papa about him. His story is fascinating and good practice for my English. After I iron Mutti's uniform and my three blouses, I ring for Ida's elevator.

"Hallo," she says, smiling mysteriously. "I'm glad you have time for me because I'm in the mood to talk about the old days. Last night I finished a book which reminded me of my life." My eyes land on the brown paper parcel she set against one leg of her chair.

"This is the book," she pats the parcel. "I'm lending it to your mother to read. You know that I came from Austria, Ja?" I nod. She's told me that already.

"I came to New York around 1915 with five young children in my care. You see, I was in charge of delivering them to the Silversteins in Passaic, New Jersey." She sees the question in my eyes and shakes her head. "No, no, not my children. I was only 15 years old. Well, here is a little history lesson," she says, clanking the large, empty elevator from the lobby to the fourth floor to answer a ring.

"Austria and Germany. They were in the first big war together; and when they lost, they both had to give up some land. Germany — it lost the Sudetenland and my country Well, the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire fell apart.... Later on, this irked Hitler tremendously and helped push him into aggressions 20 years later." She sighs, "The political and economic situation was in turmoil, and life was never good for poor Jews anyway.... So, we lost the war to the Allies, and can you imagine, I fell asleep an Austrian and woke up a Polish subject."

"Hallo," she says to a young couple with a baby, watching them get off on the second floor.

"My parents had been writing to relatives who immigrated to America years earlier. So my father decided that I should go to America and also take some neighbor's children along to their relatives in New Jersey. There were five of them - the youngest, was five, the oldest, eleven. The sea voyage was awful, very crowded and long, but we finally arrived and came through Ellis Island where we were met by the Silversteins. We all wore large identity tags. So many people ... " she silently takes the elevator to the lobby.

"They got me work in a garment factory, sewing pockets on blouses. Before long, I graduated to making button holes. The Silversteins were nice. I lived with them until I had enough money to rent my own room." She rubs her fingers through her red hair, exposing gray roots everywhere. "I was about 18 at the time. Then I met a nice man. His name was Karl Kemmer, also from Austria."

"Good evening, Herr Hilker," she greets a short man lighting a long pipe. In silence, we rise to the third floor. The elevator squeals up inside the stairwell with jerks and shudders, stopping a foot or so below the landing. He tips his hat and steps off the elevator, leaving a cloud of smoke behind. "Sorry," she calls after him. "Sorry for the bumpy ride."

"We got married," Ida continues, "and we were very happy. Four years later there was a knock on the door. A woman with two boys said she was Frau Kemmer. 'Karl,' I called. I'll never forget his expression when he saw her. I still don't know if he was glad or sad, but what did it matter? I didn't even know that he was already married. He never told me. I'll never know how she found us..." She looks sad. Although she made her account as colorless as possible, I can feel her pain. My chest

tightens and I stop chewing my lip.

"They annulled my marriage and my heart broke," her voice cracks a little on the last word. I usually adore sharing confidences with Ida, but today I wish she hadn't told me.

"Good evening, Ida," says Herr Neumann from the fourth floor. He's the one who owns a television. "Wasn't Milton Berle funny last night?" he asks me. "Yes," I laugh. "I've never seen a man wearing a diaper before."

"I, myself, only wear them on Sundays," says Herr Neumann, winking at me as he gets off on his floor. His joke makes Ida smile.

"I wish that my mother were more like you. You're so easy to talk to. Mutti and I never seem to oh, I don't know She always defends herself, even though I am not accusing her of anything," I tell Ida.

"Hey," Ida says, folding her hands over her stomach. "Your mother is as she is. She's had a hard life and it has made her defensive. We're just different. I live a quiet life. I'm fat, and I don't care to ever meet another man. I enjoy eating whatever I like, and I have a lot of time to think. It doesn't take immense concentration to operate this elevator, you know. In the school of life, I don't blame anyone. We all operate within our own personality restrictions."

"Yeah," I say, "especially my mother."

"She's still hungry for life and doesn't want to get cheated out of any more time. I've gotten beyond that and am just hungry for good food," Ida says, chuckling to herself.

"I know that she is hungry, and I think that I am very inconvenient for her,"

I say. But quickly feeling disloyal, I shrug and tell her the details about the billowing, pink crinoline Jane wore to school today. It's one of our favorite subjects – the girls school wardrobe.

The fold-away ironing board is set up in the middle of our room. Mutti presses the stiff, white apron carefully, paying extra attention to the circular ruffle around the edge.

"I've been talking to Ruth about you," she says. "You're alone too much, without supervision and without proper meals. Hand me that blouse on top of the pile Actually, you can continue ironing."

No scolding. No threatening. I have no idea what she's got in mind. She hangs the apron over a chair, and I start ironing the backside of a white blouse.

"Do you remember Mr. Berger, her employer who drove us to Times Square?" I nod.

"They know of a childless couple who recently lost a foster daughter, a girl whose mother wasn't able to take care of her. Kind of like us," she says, examining the gathered sleeve on the blouse under my iron.

"I made an appointment for us on Sunday to meet Mr. and Mrs. Walter.

"What for?" I ask, sensing her answer before she gives it.

Sunday afternoon is sunny as mother and I take a number of subways to arrive at 187th street and Bennett Avenue in Fort Washington. Unlike the short row house we live in, this house is very tall. I wait for someone to answer the door

at apartment 4F. Dogs bark. Mutti rings again.

"Coming. Please excuse the mess," says a tall, slender woman with dark hair woven around her head in thick braids. She holds two tan Dachshunds back with her leg.

"I'm Edith Walter. "Behave, Hansel and Gretel," she says, just as her dogs jump up and lick my hand. We follow her past piles of open cartons into a large, living room with a high ceiling. I stumble over the edge of a rug roll.

"We are tired of rattling around in all these rooms," says Mrs. Walter, removing a man's light blue shirt which covered her dress, "and are moving to a house in Ardsley, Westchester. That probably sounds silly, I know, because we'll have even more space, but it's always been our dream to get out of the city. Now that Eric is semi-retired from the fur business, we can finally make our dream come true." She tucks some loose black hair behind her ear and waves us toward a dark, blue velvet sofa. Overlooking the sofa is an oil painting of an obviously younger-looking Mrs. Walter. She stands in the middle of the room and offers us a drink. As if he were waiting for the moment, Eric Walter enters the room, carrying a tray of glasses and a pitcher of iced tea.

"Hello," he says and faces me, stretching his hand first to Mutti and then to me. "How do you like America?" he asks me.

"I like it very much," I say, "and will like it even more when my English improves."

"I play tennis and ping-pong, do you?"

"No, Mr. Walter," I say and wonder if a baldish, gray-bearded man isn't too

old to play tennis.

"You can call me Eric," he says, sitting down on the sofa and inviting me to also sit. "That's my American name. *Erich* was my name in Europe, but it sounds too strange here. But your name sounds good both in German and English so you don't have to change anything."

"Except that I like to be called Vivi," I say, "but that doesn't sound right in English, I've been told." I lower myself into the far corner of the blue sofa and sit rigidly, clinging to my purse and staring about the room. He nods. It takes him a few seconds to think up another question. I notice Mutti and Mrs. Walter walk to a corner of the room and speak too softly for me to hear.

"Well, Vivian," Mrs. Walter says, walking toward me. "Your mother says that you may come to live with us in Westchester. Do you think you will like that?"

"I guess so, Mrs. Walter," I say.

"Call me Edith," she says, seeming pleased. "We are going to become good friends. Our last foster girl was called Connie, and we had her for two years. Why don't we pick Vivian up on the 17th of June," she says, turning to Mutti, "after school is over. Then we'll drive right out to Westchester with her. Eric will go up to your place, and he'll carry her suitcase down."

Mutti agrees to that plan, shakes hands with them and motions for me to follow her. At the door they smile and wave goodbye, making me feel like an inconvenient piece of luggage, loaded and unloaded, as necessary.

When we return to the street, a strong breeze has changed the sky to hazy blue, chasing smoky gray clouds across the horizon. I too feel as helpless as if I'm

caught in a whirlwind.

"You don't love me," I cry, hiding my face in my hands.

"That's not true at all. You and Ali are very important to me. Always were," Mutti says, stroking my head with her hand. "Your father found it easy to leave you, but not me."

"Then why send me away?" I ask quietly, wiping my tears with the back of my hands.

"Be my big, mature girl," she says in her most conciliatory voice. "You know that I can't look after you the way I should. You are not eating well, and I can't help you with your homework. Eric said that he likes to help with assignments. He said that he always worked with their former girl, Connie, too."

I know that Mutti would prefer silence on the subway ride home but my mind spins.

"Do you have to pay for me?" I ask in a voice that sounds dejected, even to me. All of my resistance is slipping away, and I would rather close my eyes and think about Papa and what life would be like if we were a real family. Over the rumble of the train, she turns to me, and under the bright subway lights, I can see the fire of determination in her burning blue eyes.

"I'm doing this to protect you," she points out, and admits that she will pay them a small amount for my monthly expenses. I say that I feel bad that she has to pay them. She says that her mind is made up, and I will see what a nice life I will have when I get out of the city. I know that I'm expected to be silent and agreeable and can't counter with a better proposal.

We buy a golden-brown, rotisserie-broiled chicken at the corner store. When Mutti gets off to prepare our dinner I decide to stay with Ida in the elevator. I don't want to go to our room.

An hour later, having told Ida all about the Walters, I return to our room and hear Mutti's raised voice.

"Well, you know it wasn't my idea to leave Germany," she shouts. "You're the one who insisted on immigrating. I just didn't want us separated."

"Sending Vivi to Westchester is not a separation? You don't want the responsibility. You'd rather go out for drinks with your co-workers than come home to her," Ali shouts.

"Well, I don't see you making an effort to be with her," she says.

"Excuse me, but last time I checked, you were the mother," he says. I enter. He winks at me. With rolled up sleeves, Ali is cracking and sucking on a chicken bone. He waves it at me in greeting.

On the 17th of June, I am riding the elevator with Ida while waiting for Eric Walter. This morning, before Mutti left for work, I tried to talk to her.

"Can't we sit and talk about my going to the Walters?" I asked, holding my breath.

"No, Vivi," she said, "you don't have to stay forever, but for now it is really better for you." She stopped putting on her make up and stroked my hair. I wished she would never stop. She stared at me a moment and her eyes looked genuinely sad. "It will be all right," she said "By the way, the top button is loose on my white

work blouse. Could you please sew it on for me? Be sure to check all the buttons while you're at it." I can still feel her lips on my hair and her warm breath against my cheek.

We are on the fourth floor, dropping off Miss Heller, the 70-year-old spinster, when someone jabs the elevator on the lobby floor. Eric, wearing baggy jeans and a white cotton shirt with rolled-up sleeves, enters our cage.

"Hi. Are you ready to go to Westchester?" he asks. I force a smile for him as I watch his adam's apple jiggle above his collar. A ripple of panic runs through me as I introduce him to Ida. Reluctantly, I show him our room where my suitcase stands ready.

"We'll see each other again," Ida says reassuringly, as the elevator stops in the lobby.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

LIFE WITH THE WALTERS

The sky is clear and blue, full of small white clouds, as Eric's car races down the expressway to Westchester. I can feel the cool air rushing past me. The cars ahead part as Eric tells me that he has owned his Plymouth for two years. I tell them that this is my longest car ride ever. Sharing the back seat with Hansel and Gretel, I stroke their short fur to distract me from asking for a bathroom stop. The scenery whips by as I look through the rear window, watching houses disappear. Rolling, green farmland hugs the road.

"Do you own a pair of dungeries?" Edith asks me, without turning from the front seat.

"No, I don't," I answer. She reminds Eric to stop in White Plains.

"I guess that dungeries haven't invaded Germany yet," Eric says, flicking a glance at me in his rear-view mirror.

After an hour's drive, the car stops in front of a Woolworth 5&10 store, and we get out.

"Entertain yourself! Get an ice cream soda," he says to me, peeling a dollar bill from his wallet. "We need stuff from the hardware department over there," he says, pointing to the rear of the store, past stockings, green-and-white dishes and piles of

lingerie.

"May I haf zomet'ing vanilla ice cream?" I say to the girl behind the food counter. Just choosing something to buy makes me feel independent and powerful.

Edith calls me over to a clothing counter and holds a pair of blue jeans against my waist. "Connie always wore dungeries on weekends," she says, selecting a short-sleeved red-and-white checked blouse, which she thinks will fit me. I catch ice cream drops before they drip on my hand.

"We are almost there," Edith says, as we drive up a tree-lined hill with widely spaced houses standing back from the road. The car stops at the top of the hill, before a gray-roofed house flanked by two, small, red-leafed trees.

"Here we are," says Eric.

A short red brick path leads to the glass paneled door that Eric holds open to the house. Persian carpets cover every inch of the hardwood floor, right up to the white-painted staircase.

"Your bedroom is upstairs. Ours is on this floor, past the dining room at the back of the house," Edith explains. "Gather up your things, and Eric will show you to your room."

He opens the door to a small room containing a bed, dresser, mirror, chair, closet and open window. "All for me?" I ask, impressed to have a room all to myself.

"Now, you may want to look around awhile. Come down whenever you

like," Eric says, opening the closet which is already half full with garments.

"We want you to be comfortable here. Use anything you need. Those are Connie's clothes," he says with a wave. "Edith thinks that they will fit you, although," he tilts his head appraising my body from head to toe, "you are much smaller. You can try a dress on now, and I'll tell you if it fits," he says anxiously.

"I have my own things," I say, shaking my head, "but maybe when school starts, I'll wear some of the clothes. First I'll unpack, and then I'll come down," I say, as he walks away.

With a deep breath I look out of the window at a large lawn sprinkled with pine trees and surrounded by a hedge. I can even smell the pine trees when I inhale. Alone at last in my own room. Off in the distance, a dog is barking. Too restless to stare out of the window for long, I unpack my suitcase and walk down the wide hallway to join them downstairs in the living room. A cloud of smoke hangs over the room as Eric rolls a cigar between his thumb and index finger before puffing it. "We have a new television," he says.

"I like television," I say, "especially Milton Berle and 'Your Show of Shows,' on Saturday nights. Will we watch it every night?"

"Yes," Edith answers, "after our bath."

"Your rugs are beautiful," I say. "They have lovely colors."

"I am glad you like them," says Edith, carrying a pile of folded linen topped with my new jeans and blouse into the adjoining kitchen, "because we do have a serious issue to tell you about." I wonder what I've already done wrong.

"These are valuable rugs. See the white fringes?" she says when she returns. I nod.

"Please don't step on them. Take a large step across, like this." She shows me how to avoid trampling on the rugs, as she moves from window to window pulling back the curtains to let light in.

"It didn't take Connie long to not step on the fringes, and I am sure that you too, are a quick learner," she says.

"The sun bleaches everything, so we will close the drapes until the afternoon," she continues, while she opens the last curtain. She allows a ray of sunlight to illuminate her portrait, which hangs over the sofa.

"You were... I mean are pretty," I say, staring at the glinting black eyes and shiny black hair in the painting.

"That's better," Edith says, slowly turning and taking in the room. "Thank you for the compliment."

"Edith was and is a real beauty," Eric says. "Even over the years her looks have improved. Her black hair got blacker, her figure improved and her nails grew long and red. And now she wants to get her hands dirty and be a suburban housewife. Right, Edie?" he says winking at her. She smiles and nods toward a framed photograph that hangs above his desk.

"That's Connie," she says, pointing to a girl with long windblown hair, standing a few feet in front of a tree. "She was the class president that year." I think she looks like a 17 year old, but Eric says that she was 14 when that photo was taken.

"When will you turn 14?" Eric asks me.

"I will be thirteen on October one," I answer. "Connie is very pretty."

He stands up quickly, so quickly that he knocks over the high-backed chair he is sitting on. "Yes, that she is. Come with me," he says. "I want to show you the garden." He opens the set of French doors in the kitchen, and a fresh breeze rushes into the room. Just outside the doors there is a patio and a circular table shaded by a red- and-green-striped umbrella. Behind the patio is the rambling lawn surrounded by a fence, beyond which, woods begin.

"I know that you will be as good a foster daughter as Connie was," Eric says, draping his arm around my shoulders and squeezing me to him.

I help Edith wash the dinner dishes, and she says that after the evening news on television, she will run a tub in her bathroom for us to share. She and Connie always bathed together, she explains. "It saves money not to run two tubs of hot water. Now go get your nightgown," she says.

There is no privacy in the tub with her, and I wish she would fill it with more water than the 10 inches she says are adequate for us. When Eric enters the bathroom while I'm soaping myself, I blush so deeply I can feel red blotches on my neck. Even Edith notices. "Nudity is nothing to be ashamed of. Don't be shy," she says. Eric brushes his teeth, spilling white-tooth paste juice on his beard. I feel too exposed and have never been nude in front of anyone before. Mother always asks me to turn around when she undresses, and I've always done the same. And here is

Eric, a stranger, watching me wash myself.

Anxious to be alone after the "Mama" show on television, I yawn and say that I am sleepy, and go upstairs. I arrange my clothing on the chair and drop myself down on the bed and bury my face in the pillow. I don't want to think of anything sad, but my thoughts turn to mother and how convinced she is that life with the Walters is the solution for me. She doesn't know them other than our one meeting, and her last words, that this is best for me, ring in my ear Suddenly, I feel a hand stroking my back with light strokes up and down, roaming freely. I didn't hear footsteps climb up the stairs, and my stomach knots at the intimate touching.

"I will never forget to tuck you in," Eric whispers softly.

"You don't have to," I say, turning over to avoid his hand. "I am used to falling asleep, and I'm a good sleeper."

"Yes, but you need a little kiss, it will help you sleep even better," he says, coming closer and bending down. Instead of kissing my forehead as I expect, he kisses my mouth with moist lips. His beard smells of stale cigar and toothpaste.

"Good night," he says in a sing-song voice, as I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

It is a black night without stars. The street is dark, and I can see nothing. I am alone as I walk. Faster and faster. Suddenly a siren screams, drowning the sound of the footsteps that follow me. "Help!" I try to shout, but I can't emit a sound because my

mouth is too dry. I run and run, "Get away" my mind tells me. "Run, run." Fear grips my heart, squeezing tightly. I run into a huge man's face. His mouth is wide open. He laughs, exposing his rough, pink tongue and shiny, gold fillings.

I hear myself moan and clutch something furry and warm that growls. The sound wakes me up. Gretel shifts to escape my groping hands. I am confused. The room is dark and strange. Slowly it comes back to me. I live with the Walters. Papa doesn't even know my new address. I wonder what mother is doing. I feel my cheeks turn red hot while a shiver runs down my back. "We're going to bathe together every night," Edith told me. I cover my head with the pillow and hope not to dream again. I don't want to think about Papa or Oma, and I don't want to picture mother. I miss Ida and the traffic shrieks of Broadway -- the day and night sounds. I used to try to identify them. The round clock on the night-stand ticks steadily, reminding me of Opa's workshop. The sound gives me comfort as my eyes close.

"I hope you like gardening," Edith says the next morning after breakfast, "because I certainly need your help." She leans back in her chair and stretches, flexing her fingers and circling her wrist, as though performing an exercise. Her sleek black hair is covered with a blue scarf. She pulls striped cotton gloves out of the side pocket.

"I've never gardened," I say, proud of my new dungeries, which are loose in the waist and too long, even though I rolled them over and over, creating a fat

round sausage around my ankles, "but show me what you want me to do."

"Well, after you wash the dishes, come outside and I will show you," she says, holding up her cup. "Pour me a little more coffee, would you? I drink too much coffee."

In the days that pass, we prune the hedges, transplant bushes, shift flagstones to create a path and clear a very steep hill of numerous weeds. Eric never fails to enter my room and kiss me "good night" on the lips. His roaming hands accompany his kisses. He says that he's giving me a little massage to relieve my muscles from gardening. He doesn't stop when I tell him that my muscles don't hurt. Edith never comes with him to say "good night."

"Now that it's cleared, I want to cover our hill with pachysandra plants," Edith says one evening towards the end of July. "You and I will be done before school starts. After all, we still have most of the summer."

After dinner she suggests we take the dogs for our usual walk. The moon is full and smiling a superior smile down to earth. The odor of mowed grass is all around me. The stillness is strange here, compared to Broadway's traffic sounds, and yet, I hear lots of murmurs, rustles and chirps. Hansel and Gretel pull Edith in opposite directions, sniffing and digging for unseen treasures.

"You hold the dogs," she says, stopping before a large wooden clapboard house, "while I clip something." We are two blocks away from our street, and she steps into the side yard of the house. A twig cracks in the darkness, and I see her pull

and tug. I see that when she returns to the sidewalk, the brown paper bags she brought from home are brimming with greenery.

"I'm not hurting anyone," she says, "although I probably shouldn't do it. But really, it's better for the plants to be thinned out a bit."

I don't know what to say to her. Suddenly trees and bushes have strange threatening shapes in the dark, and I don't know if it is fear of a neighbor's discovering our theft or moonlit darkness that makes my heart beat so rapidly. Nothing is as it seems. My shocked, inner voice whispers, "You're a thief, nothing but a thief." I wish I could shout that at Edith. When we turn a corner, she finds another house with a field of pachysandra plants. She pulls a plant clipper out of her back pocket and whispers to me to not let the dogs follow her. "It's better with a clipper," she says, when she returns. "I can't leave a trail of uprooted plants, and we don't want anyone to surprise us suddenly."

Our nightly dog walks take us past houses Edith has robbed. One night, a blaze of light approaches on the street. A car engine drowns the night noises. Edith is stealing plants from a crowded plant bed. I picture us getting caught and police sirens escorting us to the station. "It isn't my fault," I will say, "'I was just holding the dogs."

"America doesn't want thieves," they will tell me. "We're sending you back where you came from." My hands are so wet and clammy that the leash slips out of my hand, and Hansel runs into the stranger's yard to chase after Edith.

"That's good thinking, Vivian. You're becoming more like Connie when you use your head," she says approvingly, when she finally emerges through a hedge with her hair disheveled. Whenever you see someone approach, let go of the dogs leash. Then it looks like I was chasing them."

Eric is sweeping the flagstone patio Monday evening in the middle of a particularly hot day in August. He looks up when I come through the French doors. "We are going to eat dinner on the patio table," I announce. "Edith says the kitchen is too hot. He bends down to stroke Gretel, and I ask him if he wants to drink iced tea with his meal. After our dinner of curly noodle salad tossed with canned tuna fish and canned, minced carrots and peas, Eric lights a cigar, leans back and blows a thin stream of cigar smoke upward. I comment that it must be wonderful to have been born in America. "People here are lucky," I say.

"Yes, they are. But, you know, America has recently gone to war too, and many people lost loved ones. Though, I agree it is always easier to be a native than to be an immigrant."

"Except in Germany," I say. "We were natives but that didn't make us welcome."

"True," he says with a small nod, "same as in Austria. Edith was born here. Her parents were German, I think from Frankfurt, but I came from the other side. I still have an accent, probably because Edith and I continue to speak German to each

other to keep our language knowledge alive. But I think we have helped you improve your English, because we translate a lot of words for you, right?"

I gaze at the fireflies, dancing their magical ballet, spinning from bushes to trees and nod, "Yes it helps a lot. Was it hard for you when you came here ... when you were an immigrant?"

"Well, if you refill my glass, I'll tell you my history," he says pointing with his cigar.

"My family and I lived in Austria, about 50 miles outside of Vienna in a small town. My father was in the fur business and I, the youngest, was learning the trade from him. I always watched him work when I wasn't in school. An older brother had gone to America years before. I didn't really remember Joseph anymore. When I turned 16, just a teenager, I was called into the army to serve during World War One. But my father said, "Why fight and maybe die for a country that has no use for you? We have to help you get away."

"Jews were also persecuted then?" I ask, thinking about Berlin during the war. It seems like a lifetime removed from the beautiful, quiet surrounding of the Walter's garden in Westchester.

"Well, Jews were tolerated but never liked," he says, tapping cigar ash into the round, glass ashtray. "My father was very religious, and Orthodox Jews were distrusted the most. I left one night on foot and was promptly arrested in the next town. At the police station, before they questioned me, I threw a chair at them and got away. I fled to Germany and on to England. In Liverpool, I boarded a ship that

was going to Canada, and I worked in the kitchen to reduce my fare." He pushes himself out of the chair and walks across the patio to pick a spent dahlia bloom.

"In Canada, I was arrested when we docked because my papers were not in order. The authorities allowed me to call my brother Joseph, who lived in New York. He came as quickly as he could and posted a \$500 bond to free me. That was a ton of money then. My brother took me to Windsor, Ontario, and there he bribed a truck driver to use me as an assistant. On the other side of the border, he took me to his family in New York. For years, I slept on a cot in their hallway. When the American authorities granted an amnesty in the 20s, I became legal." He studies the tip of his cigar, chewed flat and in need of blotting, and says, "America is a wonderful country."

The Walter's hill is covered with plants. Neighbor's plants stolen during nightly strolls with the dogs. Mother called me twice, always while Edith or Eric hovered nearby. She assumes that I'm delighted with my surroundings and never asks if I really like the Walters. I wrote Papa a letter, but didn't mention our walks to steal plants nor about bathing with Edith. Eric always comes in to brush his hair or his teeth or to sit down on the closed toilet seat for a chat. Maybe that is what families do in America. I don't know. But I do dread Eric's moist kisses.

On my first day of junior high I brush my hair gently because my head hurts

me. I wish, once more, that my hair was long. Edith cut it last week over my protest, saying that short hair is easier to care for and that Connie cut her hair after the picture on their wall was taken. When Connie's dresses are too big on me, Edith gives me a belt and says that blousy is better than tight. She hemmed three dresses for me with large stitches in case I grow. I'd like to ask Edith why Connie didn't take her dresses with her when she left, but when I've asked Edith or Eric about Connie, they change the subject or tell me how comfortable she was with them, and not as modest as I pretend to be. She also was a very good student, Edith said, getting all A's and B's on her report card. "Connie was smart. Connie could cook. Connie was your favorite," I mimic inwardly, because I don't like to be compared to her. I am sure she would not like to be compared to me either. I brush my teeth after breakfast and pinch my cheeks and lips to add color to my boring, brown eyes.

Warm wind blows in my face as I approach the huge school building, along with well-dressed boys and girls coming from all directions. Going to a new school and trying to make friends terrifies me. I hand my information envelope to the principal's secretary, who examines me through very thick, black-framed glasses before giving me a card that lists my classes, rooms and teachers. Then she sends me to room 224. At least I understand a lot more English than a year ago and can follow her directions.

The desks are in tidy rows, and the teacher stands in front of the class with a pointer in her hand. Mrs. West's name is written in large, chalk letters on the blackboard. She is a thin, worried-looking woman with straight, salt-and-pepper

hair, which covers one eye whenever she moves her head. I find a vacant seat in the front row and sit down. When Mrs. West leaves the room briefly, the girls squirm and giggle, and the boys balance pencils on their noses. Another school year has begun, with competition, the rush to show off in front of the class, the satisfaction of knowing answers for oral drills, weekly spelling tests, reciting sounds in unison and, hopefully, each day growing in understanding.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

MY BODY IS NOT MY OWN

Her eyes make a downward movement toward the rugs, and I know that my feet are in the wrong place again. Edith's reprimands are very subtle. She arches her eyebrows meaningfully or purses her lips with disapproval, and I can almost hear her say that Connie never needed to be reminded once an order was issued. I know that I will also disappoint her when I bring my report card home, because unfortunately, unlike Connie's report card, there will be very few A's. The thought makes my head ache, but I twirl my first black skirt for her inspection. The skirt is an early Christmas present from the Walters, because tonight is a school Christmas dance. I can't wait to go. Edith adjusts my pink blouse, which she says was one of Connie's favorites. Then she wraps a striped, silky shawl around my shoulders which also belonged to Connie. My hair is wavy and almost reaches my shoulders. I've finally convinced Edith that I really need long hair.

Eric compliments my looks and offers to drive me to school. When I hop out of the car, he clears his throat and says that I shouldn't let any boys kiss me. "Remember," he says, "I'm the only one who can kiss your lips." My flushed cheeks are cooled by the snowflakes, bigger and heavier than when we left the house. As he drives off, an icy shudder runs up my spine into my scalp, squeezing my head as he

drives off. I don't want to kiss anyone, and I hate his wet good-night kisses.

"Hi, Viv," says a blond girl.

"Hi, Sally," I answer, glad that someone speaks to me.

"I'm not Sally, I'm Sue," she flings back her head. Shiny braces glitter on her teeth.

Of course she is Sue. Sally's pony tail is yellow blond. Sue's is sandy blond and longer.

"It's going to be a good dance, yes?" I try again, rushing to catch up with her.

"Yeah," she says, "but I hurt my shin this afternoon."

"Oh that's too bad," I say, peering into her face.

"No, silly," she giggles. "Not there." She holds up her right foot to show me her bruised leg.

Loud music bounces from every wall in our gym, festively decorated with wide red-and-green ribbons strung around tables covered with white paper tablecloths. I take a coke-filled paper cup from a tray. Mrs. West, wearing a red carnation corsage, hands me a sugar cookie. I take it over to a chair next to Mimi from my home-room class. I never get tired of staring at the brown freckles sprinkled across her tiny nose.

"Can you believe the dress that Joyce is wearing?" Mimi says, nudging me in Joyce's direction. "I can't believe she would wear that to a dance."

Although I'd love to share some girl talk, I don't know what to say because the dress in question looks good to me -- better than most of mine in fact. So I nod

and ask her if she thinks my ears stick out too much with my hair pulled back and tied with a ribbon.

"No, not really," she says. We both watch Harold, the handsomest boy in our class, walking in my direction. My heart thumps so loudly I can hardly breathe. I hope I won't step on his toes, I think. He touches Mimi's hand and pulls her up, saying, "Wanna dance?"

She turns to me and drops her purse in my lap. "Hold this for me," she says, smoothing her skirt down and getting swallowed up in the packed swirl of the dance floor. Why is she so certain, I wonder, that I won't be asked to dance.

I stare at the two purses in my lap and spot shiny black shoes standing in front of my chair. "Wanna dance?" says David. He pushes black-rimmed glasses back up his nose. "Sure," I say, dropping two purses on my chair and flushing with joy. I've seen David play the trombone in the band and decide to mention that to him, but thankfully, the music drowns all attempts at conversation.

"The 'good night' song," is played at 11 o'clock, signaling the end of the evening. Eric's car is waiting for me, as David and I walk out of the building. In front of me is Mimi, whispering something in Joyce's ear. Whatever it is, is apparently very funny, because their giggle is long and loud. I tell David that I had lots of fun dancing. He looks at me intently as if to assure me that he is listening to what I am saying.

"Maybe I'll see you during the holidays," David says as he passes me.

"That would be nice," I call after him, shielding myself from the snow which is changing to rain.

Green shoots push through the melting March snow as the bus takes me to Valhalla Hospital for a thorough examination. My headaches have gotten more severe, and I have them daily. Edith called New York to ask for my mother's permission to have me examined. She made an appointment for me at the hospital at 4:30, right after my last class. Mother asked to speak to me, too, but I couldn't tell her more than that my head aches from morning to night. The last months at school have been easier for me, although the headaches plague me. A constant dull, thudding hammer bangs on the roof of my head. Oma had headaches. Ever since, I have feared them. I always felt that headaches caused her death. They frighten me. I don't want to die.

Eric works with me every night to help me with my English and homework. Unfortunately, I have to stand next to him while he sits at his desk, under Connie's smiling portrait. His right hand, plays across my back constantly. Up and down. He lingers over my buttocks, which he likes to circle. In and out. Sometimes his hand is soft and probing; at other times it is almost frantic. I've asked him to please stop because it distracts and disturbs me. He responds with a long, slow look and a scolding that I am too stiff and need to learn how to relax and enjoy his "little massages," then, adding coldly, "you want to pass school, don't you? You won't without my help." That is true. I do not want to get left behind in school. I am

already one year older than most students in my class because I started in grade six, instead of seven, when I arrived almost two years ago.

Edith generally goes next door during my homework sessions. She has made friends with our neighbor Mrs. Weil, and she spends time with her, having, what she calls "a coffee klatsch." Since winter, she can't steal pachysandra anymore at night. I hope when the ground thaws she won't start collecting a new specimen. The night of my school dance, Eric pushed his tongue through my lips when he came in to say good night. Then he took my hand and held it over the hard bulge in his pants, pressing my hand over him.

"Now see what you've done," he said, kneading my hand over his penis.

"I didn't do ... "

"Shsh," he covered my lips with his. He has repeated that several times since that night. My head aches and throbs just thinking about Eric.

"Valhalla," is my stop. Most of the passengers on the bus exit as well. I start for the information desk, my heart pounding in anticipation. "Go to room 124 right down the hall," the gray-haired lady at the information desk tells me. I suck in my breath for courage and with mother's Blue Shield, Blue Cross papers in my hand, I wait my turn. Finally, a young man with hands that smell of soap examines my eyes and mouth and checks my reflexes with a silver-colored round tool that has sharp and dull points.

In the ensuing weeks, I am frequently examined, probed and checked for any possible reason that could be the cause of my headaches. I always reach the hospital, alone, by bus, after school. Strange hands push parts of my body, knock the tips of my knees and shine lights in my eyes. Tongs, pliers, and pincers poke and prod my head. Afterwards, the bus takes me to the bottom of the hill that leads to the Walter's house. One day, the neurologist says that even though I have no clinical symptoms of a brain tumor, a further diagnostic test is recommended.

When I lie down on the tray with wheels, I feel like I am being served for breakfast to starving medical students who need to practice a spinal tap. Curled up, hugging a pillow, I am experiencing severe pain after the spinal tap. The young doctor-to-be can't find the right spot to draw marrow from my spine and has to make several punctures.

I can barely force myself up the hill after the bus drops me off on an exceptionally cold evening in April. The biting wind blows me upward towards the Walter's house.

Throughout the long days ahead, all that is demanded of me is that I passively submit to stranger's hands and questions. On one Thursday hospital visit, the nurse asks for a urine sample. Unfortunately I had just relieved myself. Running water in the sink is useless. My body betrays me, resulting in the painful insertion of the catheter. Before I am released that day, I am told that the spinal tap has to be repeated on my next visit.

I feel like a drifting leaf, blown in any direction the wind decides. Turned and twisted, I feel powerless. If my Papa were here, I believe he would protect me, hug me, and kiss my headache away.

Mother has never been as affectionate as I would like her to be. She always is the one who ends my hugs. I have convinced myself that she doesn't really like me because I remind her of Papa. I think that when she punishes me, she is striking blows at my father for disappointing her. I shake my head as if to deny my thoughts. Better not to dwell on what I cannot change I remind myself, as I shed tears that no one sees.

Dr. Olsen says that the result of the last spinal tap is also inconclusive and the neurologist will schedule an air test which requires hospitalization.

As I am wheeled into a cold room, a tall man, wearing a white coat, explains the air test to me. I shiver. He tells me that air will be blown through a small drilled opening in the top of my skull to take an x-ray picture of my brain. I force my eyes open, even though the bright light burns them, to look into his face. I see my reflection in his shiny glasses. During the procedure, I am drowsy, although I feel as if my head is an overfilled balloon waiting to explode, similar to the oil well that recently exploded in Texas. I wonder what will spill out of my head.

The following Saturday, mother visits me in the hospital with Berti Freiberg,

the only person she knows who owns a car. That day, I am scheduled to take 24 pills - one every hour, to try a different idea some doctor has. I throw up most of the time she is with me. Food trays are pushed down the halls. Pills are dispensed. I feel as if I am watching myself from a place far, far away.

My favorite time is when Nurse Ruby is on duty. She always comes to the side of my bed and fixes my blanket. She also brings me a tuna fish sandwich on soft, white bread with a cool glass of ginger ale just before the lights are dimmed. When she says good night, her competent, warm brown hands rub my neck and shoulders, after she brushes my tangled, hair. Then there is darkness. I can hide in sleep. I let sleep carry me away, although my frequent dreams are very frightening.

A blast of wind chases me. My Oma's face appears faintly; her head shakes from side to side as if she is saying no. Her soft cheek touches mine, but I can't grasp her. I can never reach her arms for comfort.... Now, shiny instruments dangle in the air waiting for their turn to attack me. My heart is beating wildly. I think it will choke me as-----

I jerk upright in bed and feel as if my lungs are collapsing. It is hard to catch my breath. I am relieved it was only a bad dream. Thank God. Still it struck a chord in my memory that I am unable to identify. Awake, the fleeting memory is gone, but I feel sad as if I've lost something precious.

Finally, I am released from the hospital. Nurse Ruby is the only one I hug with sincere thanks. I will miss her kindness.

Edith brings me home in the car, telling me that Mimi from school called and sent me her regards.

"That's nice," I say listlessly, picturing her tiny freckled nose.

When I reach my bed at the Walters, I claim that I can no longer walk. I reach the bathroom, by holding onto the walls for balance and continue to spend my days in bed, with an aching head and a dull sense of disaster. I comfort myself by picturing myself grown-up and making sensible decisions. One day I will be happy. I tell myself that my happy self will remember my sad self. I promise myself that I will look back and will never forget the lonely girl I once was. I pull my blanket up to cover my head, preferring life in my fantasy world.

The week end following my release, mother comes to visit me again with Berti Freiberg.

"How can you ever get a boyfriend if you can't walk?" she asks. Accepting a match from Berti she adds, "You are too pretty to want to stay in your room forever. You told me how much you enjoyed dancing at your school dance. You have to walk to be able to dance again. Right?"

"Yes," I nod, feeling miserable.

She thinks for a minute and says, "Would you like to come home with me?"

School is just about finished anyway."

"Oh, yes. Very much," I answer without hesitation.

"You know that Susie and Pitti are with me now. They flew over on TWA two weeks ago, in an animal crate, and I could use your help with walking them. But if you can't walk..." she shakes her head, "I can't take you home."

"You would take me home with you, now, today?" I ask.

"Yes, but I can't carry you and neither can Berti," she says and smiles. "Funny, you do look a lot happier already."

I feel as if a breeze lifts me and allows me to float about, gathering my belongings. I leave everything that belonged to Connie in the closet. Mother goes downstairs to the Walters to explain that she now has an apartment and is taking me home. She asks them to notify my school.

I have the feeling that this is the last time I will ever see them. I say a rather formal good bye. Flanked by mother and Berti, I practically waltz out of their house.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

HOME SWEET HOME

He flings the door open and lowers his fat body into the threadbare blue wing chair by the window. Between city sounds of car horns and sirens, I can hear his newspaper crackle. He spreads it open, quickly losing himself in the pages. Our narrow apartment window faces the exterior of the dark red brick wall opposite. The weather always seems cloudy from here, because I can never see the sky. When I get home from school, I peek through our smudged curtains and dirty windows into the daily drama of their life. The pretty woman comes in and flits before him, twirling in a flared green skirt, her waist nipped by a wide black belt, which pushes her bosom up close to her chin. He nods without lowering the newspaper he is reading. She stops twirling and grabs her sweater and a purse from the side table and I hear her say that she might be late.

“Good Night, Mona,” he says, turning the page.

The hot summer has passed amid New York’s horns and sirens at mother’s efficiency apartment on 99th Street and West End Avenue. Mother sleeps on the black-and-gold pull out couch in the living room. I sleep on the cot in the kitchen where I am a silent witness to the couple’s life in the apartment opposite my window.

Now that I'm home, my head does not hurt. I haven't talked to the Walters since I left them, and don't miss them at all. I wonder if Connie got headaches, too, and had to leave for the same reason.

I walk the dogs as soon as I get home from school, hoping to avoid a small, dark-haired man who always seems to be on the street when I walk Pitti and Susie. He wears the same shiny blue suit and soiled white shirt and grins at me. His smile scares me. I feel that his eyes undress me. His fleshy lips remind me of Eric.

The first place I took the dogs when I returned to mother's house, was to visit Ida. She was very happy to see me. When I told her about my Westchester experience, she said that she thinks I had psychosomatic headaches. She said that my head hurt me because I was very unhappy and felt trapped. She is probably right. I wish I had known myself better, because I could have saved myself a lot of pain. Mother might have taken me back if I had told her that I was extremely unhappy at the Walters. Or I could have told Ali how I felt. I guess that I wanted to protect mother from the burden of taking care of me. But now, I confess to Ida that I don't want to even think about my stay with the Walters or the Valhalla hospital. To change the subject, I read her a letter from Ali and Sonja.

October 7, 1953

Dear Vivi, Happy fourteenth birthday,

Your brother is a real American soldier now; I have finished my basic

training at Fort Knox. After basic training, the army sent me to Fort McClellan to complete a cooking course, although I know how to cook, the army wanted me to learn how to cook for the troops. I've learned how to peel a lot of potatoes and lots of other things. Actually, I like the regulated army life. Because I am a soldier, I will become an American citizen in about 90 days. Yea!

Sonja joined me recently in Camp Rucker, Alabama, where I am now stationed. She came to Alabama wearing a winter coat and snow boots, carrying her ironing board under her arm, just like a good little *Hausfrau*. (housewife.) I wish I had taken a picture of her, climbing out of the Greyhound bus. By the way, the weather is very hot here, and she will not need a coat or boots. And they do sell ironing boards in Alabama. The base was recently reopened, and I am helping establish a mess hall.

We've rented a little furnished apartment in a small town called Enterprise. In the middle of the town is a statue of "Boe Weevil," a bug that ate the cotton plants that used to grow here. Cotton supported many people in this area. Children sell boiled peanuts on the street corners. I've bought them and they taste quite good.

I am glad that you are back with Mutti. She hasn't said much about your stay at the Walters, except that you apparently weren't happy. You will have to tell me more about everything when I next see

you. I don't know when that will be. I am thinking about buying a used Pontiac. Maybe we'll drive to New York when I get a long leave.

I've written you a long letter, and now it is your turn to write us.
Be well, Kisses and hugs from

Ali and Sonja

Mother tries to eat dinner with me several times a week. Usually, her new boyfriend Jule Boras joins us. He is a short, thin man and I don't like him. I can tell that he does not like me either. Mother told me that she and my father met Jule in Berlin before the war. He made it to Shanghai to avoid the Nazis in Germany and immigrated to New York after the war. He is out of work, because the men's clothing store where he worked as a salesman is closed. I think they probably went out of business because of his snooty personality. Every day, he waits for my mother to come home with the *Daily News* so he can read it, while she and I prepare dinner. He also borrows money from her. Every week I see her give him 10 dollar rolls of quarters. I've asked her why she hasn't found a man that I like better. "After all, you're surrounded by people all day long," I say.

"Yes, it is true that I see people at work, but nobody ever looks at me. It is a strange feeling, but apparently, a waitress is invisible."

"That's a tough school I go to," I tell them at dinner time. Mother came home

at eight o'clock and called Jule, who lives on the fourth floor, to come down for dinner. We eat dinner from the kidney-shaped black cocktail table. I sit on the floor while they sit on the couch. I've prepared fried hamburgers with sliced tomato and home fries with onions. When I think that only his eyes can see me, I casually play with my bare toe nails, which he has told me he finds "intolerable."

"Two girls had a fight after school" I tell them, biting into my hamburger. "One girl ripped the other girl's blouse open in the front. The other girl could hardly defend herself, because she didn't want her breasts exposed."

"What dirty fighting," mother says. "Where do they learn to fight that way?"

"Well, Vivi's school is on Amsterdam Avenue, not exactly the best of neighborhoods," says Jule, running his hand across the black hair net that covers his slick, flat hair. The hair net is the signal that tonight he is not going out. "Now don't you get involved with those girls," he says to me, as if I am a known troublemaker.

"By the way, Elli," he turns to mother, "can you help me out?" He pulls his pant pockets inside out to show how empty they are. I get up to prepare their coffee. They always drink a cup after dinner. He aggravates me a lot, because I see how tired mother is when she gets home and he, who doesn't even work, sits down and lets her serve him dinner. Although I didn't like Franz, he always worked, I mumble to myself, as I carry the coffee tray from the kitchen.

I am feeling very sorry for mother these days, because she told me something sad about grandfather. Apparently, when she was young, her parents didn't let her out of the house much because they were afraid that she might get hurt. "At 17,

when I was struggling to become a young woman, to find myself -- which I still haven't accomplished --" she muttered more to herself than to me, "I stayed out too late one evening. I went to a Sunday afternoon tea dance and met a man. A much older man. He wasn't even that handsome, but stupid goose that I was, I was flattered that an older man found me interesting. He 'liked my mind,' he told me. So I came home late and my father, your grandfather, accused me ..." she buried her face in the palms of her hands. "He said that I was a sexual toilet for men.... Harsh, wasn't he? It still hurts me to think of it," she said, nodding to herself.

"Was that the man who became Ali's father?" I asked her.

"Yes, he was. Like I said, I was stupid. But my father never apologized for his words, and I have never forgiven him." Mother has called me harsh names sometimes, too, but I hope that nothing that cruel will ever come out of her mouth,

When mother does not have to work on Saturday, we walk the dogs in nearby Riverside Drive Park. Autumn leaves crunch under my feet. A breeze lifts stray leaves, Pitti jumps up to catch one, surprised when it crumbles in her mouth. We pass a park bench where a mother is flanked by two girls, who are obviously sisters. They feed bread crumbs to pigeons. One is much smaller than the other. The girls are dressed in identical green coats and both have blond ponytails tied with green ribbons. I imagine that Gaby and I would be dressed alike if we were growing up together in a home with the same mother and father.

"What was my father like before the war?" I ask mother.

"Well, he was a lot like you -- very charming," she says. "He could adapt himself to different situations. Unfortunately, in his case, that meant different women who caught his eye."

"Not that again," I say. "I don't want to hear bad things about him. You, married him. So, tell me only the good things. The other stuff is not what I want hear about, that was between you and him." I don't want to get her started because then I feel that I have to defend him and we always end in a fight. However, she is the only one I can ask about Papa and I want to know more about him. I need new information for my daydreams.

"The best thing about him is that he was always able to make a living. Even when he peddled pencils at stationary stores, he built that business to a point where he hired his cousins to help them make a living. By then, Jews were no longer employed by anyone.... Jews weren't allowed to own radios, telephones, jewelry, "Jews were not even allowed to own pets Our beautiful, Zito..." she stares into space and I know her thoughts are far away and very sad. I change the subject and ask her what we will eat for lunch.

We end our stroll on Broadway, and mother sends me into Mr. B's delicatessen to buy bagels and cream cheese, and as a special treat, a quarter pound of lox. She always sends me into his store to shop, because she is afraid of Mr. B. She thinks that he doesn't like her because she sounds like a German, but I don't think he likes anyone. It's no wonder, he works all the time. I've never seen his shop closed.

I tell him that I also need a sour pickle and he tells me to pull one out of the barrel by the door so he can price it. "Eight cents" he says, and I wonder how he determines that price. But I don't question him, as I've seen him throw a customer out of his store for saying that his smoked fish costs more than the shop on the next block.

We've finished the Saturday cleaning of the apartment when Jule comes down to take mother to a movie and dinner at the Senator Cafeteria. I wonder who will pay for the tickets. They want to see "Mighty Joe Young." I wait patiently for them to leave. Jule brushes his gray fedora, smooths his white handkerchief for his breast pocket and adjusts his bow tie in front of our hallway mirror. Finally he runs his shoe tips across the back of his gray trousers and collects his black umbrella, which he uses like a walking stick. "Good for fair weather or foul," he says, in a self-satisfied manner. They finally leave. I, too, would like to see that movie, but they don't invite me to join them.

I go to our drab kitchen, cheerless, without lights. I've been warned to use as little light as possible, because electricity costs money. So I look out of my window to check what Mona and her husband are doing. He is in his usual, blue chair, sipping from a glass filled with ice cubes. I can hear Mona's voice but can't see her. I think she's got company, because a different female voice is laughing.

In the floor below theirs, a lady is nursing a baby while she rocks in a rocking chair. After a while I get tired of watching and lie down on my bed to read a new

Nancy Drew mystery, which I borrowed from the library.

On the Sunday just after the new year, I write Papa a letter. He knows that I left the Walters, but I haven't taken the time to write about all the things that happened to me since, because I feel that he doesn't really know me anymore. I doubt that he would recognize me if we crossed each other's paths. Still, he is the only father I have.

January 1, 1953

Dear Papa,

Something very sad has happened; and ever since, I have been thinking about death a lot. It happened so quickly. One minute Pitti scampered amid weeds and bushes in the park on Riverside Drive slipping through hedges, chasing the twigs I threw for her, and the next minute she was panting for breath, too weak for the walk home. Very scared, I picked her up and dragged reluctant Susie home to call mother at work. She told me to take her to the vet's office on 108th Street and Broadway. I ran all the way, begging Pitti to please not die. Her eyes were closed and white foam dripped from her mouth. The doctor said she must have eaten rat poison in the park and that he's had other similar cases recently. He thinks that some individual who doesn't like

dogs is spreading food, laced with poison. I had to leave her. I will never see Pitti again. I miss her so much. She was my best friend.

I can't really think of anything else to write you about. I like school but it is a scary place. Girls have to go to the bathroom in pairs so they won't get grabbed and attacked by older boys. Drugs are sold in the school playground. I don't know what these drugs are, but I am sure that they are illegal because of the way the boys who sell them behave. Kids my age smoke cigarettes when they walk home from school. It's on 107th Street and Amsterdam Avenue -- not a good neighborhood, but it is my school district.

While I'm writing about school, I have to tell you about the other bad thing that happened to me. But it's not nearly as bad as losing Pitti. Recently, I was in a fight at school. Carmen, the girl who fought me, is in a different class. My friends say that she is trying to make herself a reputation for being tough, so she has fights very often. I still don't know why she picked me. I turned away from a hall water fountain as she passed me and I accidentally brushed against her, "Sorry," I said, to which she replied, "Not as sorry as you will be when I see you after school at three. Out front."

I was really scared to leave school because I knew she'd be waiting for me, but I had no choice. Carmen was there, waiting for me in front of the school, by the only exit I could use. Surrounded by her

tough girlfriends, she walked right up to me and pushed me when I had to pass her. I fell against one of her friends who shouted, "Via." She pushed me back to Carmen as if I were a piece of trash.

Carmen's head was bent and she seemed furious as she charged me, swinging her hands wildly. She was going for my face, swaggering for the approval of her friends. Then, her right hand went for my blouse, ripping it and causing me to clutch fabric to my chest. I defended myself by blocking my face with my other arm. Her fist hit me on my lips, causing blood to squirt in the air. I fell to my knees, and she smiled and raised her arm above my head while her fans cheered. Then I got up and she let me go home. My front tooth is still loose.

I hope you, Gaby and Mia have a healthy New Year. Write me soon.

A paper kiss from me to you.

Love, your daughter Vivi

P.S. Excuse the wet blotches. Writing about Pitti still makes me cry.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

HELLO, PAPA

The sky is still light outside my window. I watch the sun slide into a blanket of white clouds, casting a pink glitter over the universe. The TWA plane hums smoothly through the sky. I must be close to heaven, if heaven exists. Ali says that all religions are just different roads. It doesn't matter which road you travel, whether it be Catholic, Jewish or Muslim. He thinks that they all lead to the same God, with religions serving as stepping stones. At this moment I feel closer to God than ever. He's watching me. He knows how momentous this trip is for me.

The constant hum of the plane is soothing after the excitement of the past months. Ever since Papa's letter arrived, inviting me to fly to Milan, Italy, for the summer, I've been too distracted to concentrate on anything else for long.

Jule thought that my trip was a great idea. Mutti was more hesitant. I think that she is a little jealous of my trip and confessed that she's afraid I will love Papa more than her when I return. She told me that just last night when she got home from work in time to sit on my bed a while before I fell asleep. We haven't talked much lately, ever since our ugly fight two weeks ago.

The day started very pleasantly. Jule had spent the night with mother, as he often does, on the pull-out couch in the living room. I set the table and heard them have words as I filled the coffee pot with water. Jule didn't want to take mother to a

movie that afternoon, even though they had planned it on Friday. Our breakfast was rather tense. Inwardly, I was making fun of him for his rapidly blinking eyes and for wearing a black hair net tied to keep every single one of his oiled hairs straight.

After he left our apartment to go upstairs to his, mother asked me if I wanted to go to the movie with her. I told her that I had plans with my girlfriend, Ray. Trying to cheer her up, I mentioned that I thought Jule, with his hair net, looked like a shiny, black beetle.

Her face reddened with fury. This surprised me because I thought she would laugh with me, as she often does, when I make odd comparisons. Instead, she made a big scene, saying that I wish her bad things and can't stand to see her happy. She ranted hysterically and fueled her temper with accusations, totally unrelated to the topic. I realized that she was out of control and stopped defending myself.

I ignored her and got undressed to take a shower. I was standing on the small area rug in front of my bed when she snatched the rug out from under my feet, causing me to fall down. Then she pulled me by my hair into the hallway and opened our front door and pushed me out into the corridor.

Naked.

I pleaded for entry, tears streaming down my face, terrified that a neighbor would see me. It probably took minutes, but seemed like hours before she opened the door. She said that as punishment I had to scrub the baseboards, doors and windows. And I had to cancel my plans with Ray. I agreed to everything just to be

allowed back into the apartment.

While I wiped the woodwork with ammonia and water, I sobbed. Mother is so unfair, and I am so helpless. No one ever defends me. It makes me angry that I am the one to bear her tantrums.

Since then, we haven't spoken much. I know that she expects an apology from me. She will never admit that she lost her temper for reasons I don't understand. Perhaps she has money trouble with Jule or maybe she suspects that he likes someone new. Perhaps my anger is misdirected; but since my naked humiliation in the corridor, I always spit in Jule's cup before filling it with coffee.

Mother and I avoided conversations since that incident until she sat on my bed the night before my departure. She got me to feel sorry for her again. The trouble is that I always end up feeling sorry for her. I think that, mainly, she suffers from her lack of self control. And yet, at the same time, I do admire her for the courage she had during the war years.

Mother claims that wars stole her youth. "When I was a child, we had World War I and when I was a woman, we had World War II. I got wedged in between ... World politics really cheated me and my generation," she said. Shrugging, she said that she married at 18 to gain some freedom, but instead, got pregnant with Ali immediately out of ignorance, and there went her freedom.

I asked her if I might wear lipstick when I go to Italy.

"Oh, no, you don't," she said. "You're far too young for lipstick. It will look vulgar on you." And then she warned me to not make the same mistake that she

made. "Boys don't look at me very much," I assured her, pointing to my undeveloped body. "You don't have to worry about me."

Her last words to me that night were a reminder that Papa left Germany without us. "I would have gone to Italy with him," she said. "In fact, I would have gone to the end of the earth," I heard her whisper.

I will ask him why he didn't take us, but he'll probably say that he couldn't. And he probably couldn't. I remember how those dark years went for us. Always terrified of the Gestapo. Terrified of airplanes zooming over my head. Bombs falling and destroying whatever was in their path. It was amazing that anyone survived. And my wonderful grandparents My eyes still water with tears when I think of my most precious memory, Oma. Death cheated me of the only caring and constant love I had. Lost in painful memories, I feel a thick blanket of sadness sweep over me. And then I think of all those who were not allowed to live as long as I have. I open my mental suitcase and pack my thoughts tightly away, under lock and key. I have so much to be happy about today. Dwelling in sadness is useless, I remind myself. I sit up straighter, concentrating on flying to Italy to meet Papa.

Mother has always referred to Papa as an egotist. She likes to remind me that he was a terrible husband. Then why would she have gone away with him? I am glad she didn't refuse me my trip, because I would have gone even without her permission. I wanted to take only new clothes, but she didn't buy me any outfits because she said that my Papa will no doubt buy me a whole new wardrobe. In the past year, I have earned \$25 babysitting for the Boucher family on the seventh floor.

They pay me 20 cents an hour because they like me and they appreciate that I always wash all the dishes in their sink. Many girls at school get only 15 cents an hour.

I like a girl named Ray in my school. We walk to and from school together, occasionally stopping at the Horn and Hardart automat on Broadway and 107th Street for a plate of spaghetti or an ice cream sandwich. It's fun to drop fifteen cents into a slot and watch a door open to reveal food.

Ray is also a German Jew, but she spent the war years in Belgium hidden by a Presbyterian couple named Breton. The couple was visiting Germany in 1938, because Mr. Breton was awarded a prize for an invention in auto mechanics. Ray's father and Mr. Breton had been friends since their school days, and the couple took the blond, brown-eyed child out of Germany, into Belgium, as a favor to her parents. They saved her life. Eventually, they adopted Ray. She thinks that her parents were killed in a concentration camp in Poland, but she doesn't know which one. Because of our history, Ray and I are comfortable when we occasionally reminisce about the war years and how afraid we were to live in hiding.

I don't talk about Germany to any American friends. I've learned that it is better to just say that life was very different. My friends can't understand how different my life was. When I was first asked where I come from, I told them I was a Jew from Germany. I was concerned that people might dislike me for being German. I got many strange looks. In time, I realized that nobody cares that I am German. In fact, to my surprise, people are impressed with my German background. They seem to think better of Germans than Jews. So I've learned to say that I am from Berlin.

A heavy bump and sudden drop reminds me that I am in an airplane. In my mind I am already composing a letter to Ray about my flight and the tasty dinner I ate.... The lights are turned off, and moonlight shines through the small window next to me. I don't remember falling asleep; yet all at once a stewardess is touching my elbow to offer tea or juice.

The captain's voice announces that we are stopping in Newfoundland for fuel in one hour. I wonder how long refueling will take.

The refueling stop lasts for 48 hours because, unbeknown to us passengers, the bumps and loud noises of the airplane were signs of engine trouble. The cold and windy Newfoundland airport doesn't stock the replacement parts we need. I worry that Papa will not be notified of my delayed arrival. I am assured that he will be. I eat my meals tucking a napkin under my chin like a baby, to avoid spotting my light green dress, chosen carefully, to make a good impression on Papa and my unknown family. We are given toothbrushes and emergency necessities, but our baggage stays on the plane and we can't leave the desolate, Newfoundland airport without visas.

I sit on the bed in my small room and stare out of the narrow window. There aren't any trees to look at, just gray, concrete buildings. I begin to write a letter to Ray about the plane's predicament. After a while, I close my eyes and think about what I'd like to really write her about -- my naked humiliation in the corridor and my

complicated mother. I snap my eyes open, determined to stop thinking about the past and to look forward to the future.

Finally, we are airborne again, and the droning plane engines carry me closer and closer to Papa. I hope that I will live a different life after I meet him, that I will feel complete, no longer watching other children with parents and feeling envious, as if my nose were pressed against a window separating me from what I desire but can never have.

How will I describe my life to Papa? Where should I begin?

I hope that everything will be different after we meet, that something wonderful will happen to me. Resting against the small window I rehearse what he might say and what I can answer.

The sun appears from behind the curtain of clouds, chasing the night away. Blazing red color dazzles my eyes. Around me, people stir as a stewardess comes by with orange juice and a hot face towel. I drop the flap and place a glass of juice on my tray. The plane lurches and I watch in horror as orange liquid spills, gathering in my lap. Instead of wiping my face and hands with the hot towel, I use it to dab at my dress, causing puckers on the green, crepe fabric. So much for making my good impression on Papa and his family.

Finally, my whole body leans forward in anticipation as the plane glides on the runway and rolls to a stop. Feeling dirty and disheveled, I watch a movable staircase being wheeled toward the plane. Passengers get up to gather belongings, ready

to descend.

And then I am walking down the steps, off the plane, onto the tarmac. I don't even feel my feet, they just keep moving -- one foot in front of the other toward a man with thinning black hair.

"Papa?" I ask.

He wraps his arms around me and squeezes me to him, whispering my name. He doesn't tower over me as I had remembered. His heart is pounding against mine. Years flow between us. I want time to stand still for us, to let me feel the years as if they are a moment. I bury my face in his shoulder and see him wearing black boots, standing across the street while I played hopscotch. I relish his still-familiar smell of cigarette smoke and cologne. He strokes my hair with trembling hands, before holding me back at arm's length. Liquid, smiling brown eyes stare into mine. We don't move for a long time, until the jostling passengers make us aware of our surroundings. Then Papa's arm guides me forward to the baggage room.

Shyly, we smile at each other in front of the luggage carousel. He's wearing a navy blue suit and white shirt, open at the neck. Too scared to tell him how many times I have rehearsed this scene in my thoughts, I pick up my brown, shabby suitcase. Papa takes it from me and in German says, something about his car being close by.

"We'll drive to Azzano to a house I rent. Mia and Gaby are anxious to meet you, and Hilde, Mia's sister from Israel, is staying with us. She stopped for a short visit on her way to America. That was two years ago. But we love having her; she is

wonderful with Gaby. Mia has been without any family since Berlin," he says, squeezing my hand in his. I love hearing the tone of his voice. He still has a Berliner accent, as have I. His voice sounds soft and loving.

The black car smells of stale-cigarette smoke. Papa tells me it's a two-year-old Fiat. Once seated, I tell him about my long flight and unscheduled stay in Newfoundland. He admits that he's never been in an airplane and is afraid to fly. I grope for an answer. Suddenly, I have nothing to say. I feel that I've embraced a stranger and am overwhelmed that what I've dreamed of for 10 years has truly happened. His hair is thinner and longer than I expected, sprinkled with gray. The wispy ends in the back curl up. I have the urge to reach out and touch his arm, his shoulder. To physically feel him. A drop of rain strikes the windshield, then another and another. I ask him questions about rapid weather changes. I can't believe myself. My dream has come true, and I can only talk about the weather in Italy.

"We'll soon be there," he says, lightly touching my shoulder. "Turn your head to the right and have your first glimpse of Lake Como over there, between the break in the tree line." I sit with knees pressed together, fingers twisting my handkerchief into a tight ball. I look at a wide ray of sunlight shining down through trees, shimmering over dark green water, surrounded by high, tree-covered, mountains.

"How beautiful," I say, as white sails of small boats float by.

Papa tells me the Italian way of farming is to use terraced hills. He explains that the wine grower wants the staked, grape plant roots to be thirsty and grow deep into the soil to seek the moisture they need. This makes the grapes more flavorful,

and in case of a draught, they are able to endure and survive. We drive so close to a curved stone wall that, if I stretched my hand out of the window, I could touch it.

"The reason I honk just before entering each curve is to warn oncoming traffic. That is the custom when driving on mountainous roads," Papa explains.

We pass through many small villages before I see a large, brown sign announcing Azzano. "Well, here we are," he says, as he turns down a cobblestone road that brings us to a crumbling wall. It faces the lake. Papa turns off the engine and turns to face me. A slow grin appears on his weary-looking face. "Welcome, *Puppilein*." His beautiful brown eyes twinkle at me. So many times I've looked in my mirror and imagined his nose or mouth in my face. We have the same brown eyes, and yes, I am relieved to see our lips have the same shape. "It's been too long for us," he says, "but now," he pats my hand, "we'll begin again."

A sun-blistered, faded red door opens at the center of a gray stone house. A dark haired lady walks toward me, smiling, with arms extended. With my heart thumping, I know that it is Mia. Slim and good-looking, not exactly pretty but definitely elegant, even in her casual gray pedal pushers and a white sleeveless blouse. "Vivi," she calls, with a little shriek of pleasure and folds her arms around me. Her vanilla-tinged perfume fills my nostrils, and her soft cheek presses against mine as we rock back and forth. "I'm so glad you're finally here," she says, with tears dripping from the corners of her smiling eyes, "and to finally meet you after all these years. Welcome to Italy." I hear true affection in her voice.

And then I spot Gaby over Mia's shoulder. I see short curly black hair, small body and dimpled smile. I kiss Mia's cheek and bend down to hug my sister. Our arms are around each other. We laugh and wipe the tears from each other's eyes. I look at her face again and find a trace of my father in her expressive brown eyes with the same hazel highlights.

"Hi Gaby," I say, watching a broad smile light her face while she shakes her bouncing curls.

"She doesn't speak German, even though we all speak German to each other. She's resisted learning it. It's a pity, really," Mia tells me as we walk toward the house and enter through the wide, open door. Papa is carrying Gaby in his arms. Her hands are fondling his ears while she whispers something that makes him chuckle. Not wanting to stare, I lower my head and follow.

"Are you hungry?" Mia turns to me. "Because lunch is ready." I feel self-conscious in my soiled dress and hold my handbag over the light brown stains left by orange juice.

"You may want to freshen up first. Papa will take your suitcase to your room, and when you're ready, come down and we will eat."

I follow Papa, who is still carrying Gaby, up the stairs into a white-washed room with double beds and a small dresser. Gaby shyly watches me over his shoulder, and I smile to myself. What must she be thinking of me, a big girl welcomed into her house. A stranger from a strange land claims her father and is supposedly her sister but doesn't speak her language.

The beds have matching flowered blankets in my favorite color, powder blue. Sunlight peeks through slanted green shutters. "They are closed to keep the house cool," Papa explains, and with a wave, he closes the door behind Gaby and him.

Although I am tired, I don't really want to be alone with my cluttered thoughts. I open my suitcase, but every blouse and dress is hopelessly wrinkled having been stuffed in a suitcase for three days. As soon as I've washed my face and hands in the bathroom, I go downstairs, past a mirrored hall tree, into the room next to the kitchen. I look for Papa in the large living room, filled with an old couch, two equally old easy chairs, some small tables, and a scratched, rectangular pine table surrounded by eight, unmatched chairs. Our efficiency apartment could easily fit into this room with space left over.

"We're out here," he calls, and I follow his voice into the bright sunlight. My eyes lock with his for a moment. He rises from a faded sun chair, holding a sparkling glass of red water and chewing on a lemon wedge.

"You haven't met my sister, Hilde, yet," Mia says, linking arms with him and pointing to a tall, slender lady with the same black hair and a dazzling smile. I extend my right hand to Hilde. She ignores my hand and crosses over to give me a warm embrace, and then kisses me on both cheeks.

"Have you seen the terrace yet?" she asks, and answering her own question, says, "No, of course not." Pulling my hand behind hers, she leads me to the edge of the patio, past a large round table set for lunch under the shade of a climbing grape vine. She stops by a short wall that separates us from another house but doesn't

block a magnificent view of the lake.

"It's a small house," Papa says, stretching his arms lazily behind his head. "We've been renting it for eight years now. Mia and Gaby move to Azzano as soon as Gaby's school ends for the summer."

"And," Mia adds, "we do use it all year round. Come and sit down, please."

"It is very beautiful," I say, thinking what is small to him appears lavish to me. I've never seen marble floors other than in a museum and here, gray marble is everywhere, even on the stairs.

Papa pats the empty chair next to him, and I sit down at the table, with him on one side and Gaby on the other. A girl not much older than me comes onto the terrace through the dining room door, pushing a food-laden table, on wheels.

"*Buon Giorno*" (Good Day,) she says. A broad smile covers her rosy cheeks.

"This is Rosina, our live-in helper. She is the oldest in her family of eight, and has been with us for six month now. I am teaching her how to be a proper housekeeper," Mia explains.

"Hello," I say, as Rosina places a roast and steaming bowls of potatoes and carrots on the table.

"In honor of your first lunch here, I made a German-style meal. Tomorrow it will be Italian," Mia says, slicing the roast.

After everyone's plates are filled, Papa raises his wine glass. Even Gaby and I have watered down wine. He makes a toast "to the joy of having his two daughters together for the first time in his life, but not the last time." He is close to tears as he

speaks.

Thankfully, there is a babble of Italian small talk between Mia, Hilde and Gaby, because I am feeling overwhelmed. Papa tells me that the blue cloth napkin in my lap will be mine to use for several days at lunch time and that I will be able to identify it by the carved red napkin ring. At dinner the napkins are white. Dinner is a simpler meal, he explains, generally a minestrone soup and bread with cold cuts, cheese and fruit.

"Seconds anyone?" Mia asks.

"I'll have more meat and potatoes," I say, relishing the meal, which reminds me of Oma's cooking and the magazine pictures I've often studied of happy families during holiday meals.

"I know that we have lots of important things to talk about," Papa says to me, but that will come later when we take our trip together."

"Our trip?" I ask, feeling a flutter of anticipation.

"Yes ... it's been so long since we were together," he says. "I feel a little nervous."

"Me, too," I confess.

"We'll drive to...," but just then Mia interrupts Papa with an offer of a wedge of creamy blue cheese from a cheese board. Next she passes a large salad bowl and Gaby, with a shy smile, places a salad plate before me while Rosina takes the plates away.

"Your salad is the best," I say to Mia. "I've never eaten greens like this, and

your dressing is delicious. At home we eat iceberg lettuce with French dressing, but I like your oil and vinegar dressing much better."

"I'll show you how I prepare it," she says. "In fact, you can help me in the kitchen if you like, and we'll get to know each other while we cook together. Ja?"

"Yes, I'd like that very much," I answer, "I used to cook with my Oma. Mother doesn't have much time to cook. Her hours at work are too long, and she gets most of her meals at work."

"Your Oma was a wonderful woman," Papa says. For a moment, I see Oma very clearly in my mind's eye. Her loving eyes embrace me. "Wonderful," he repeats.

After the fruit bowl is passed, the adults light cigarettes and reflect on the miracle of flying and how it has shrunk the world. After a while, Papa yawns and Mia says that it is time for a little nap, a "siesta."

"Come on," Papa says. I follow him upstairs.

"To get ready for bed, Mia just takes her clothes off and puts on a cotton robe. There is a robe behind the door for you. I'll be right in."

I can't wait to remove the dress I've worn for four days and to rest my head on the fluffy pillows. My heavy eyelids begin to shut before I even lie down.

"I'm just tucking you in," Papa says after tapping on the door and pulling the cover up over my legs.

"Good Night, my child."

I really do have a father, I think, as my eyelids begin to shut. He wasn't just in

my dreams. My body feels like it is still in the droning plane, crossing over the Atlantic.

It is cramped, and I am peering through the round window. A bird taps on the window with his beak, tap, tap tap. "Come out and play," he says, "I'll teach you how to fly." Feeling pleased that the bird likes me, I spot Ali. He is skimming flat stones across the sky to make me laugh, just as he did in Wannsee, when he took me swimming.

I think that I hear a door creak. Footsteps approach. A hand touches my head, "Vivi? Are you all right?" Someone shakes my arm. I pull the cover away from my head and open my eyes to see Papa tugging at the covers.

"What?" I open my eyes and stare at my strange surroundings. He is standing at my bedside staring down at me, his eyes cloudy, his forehead creased with concern. He looks as if he has been standing there for quite a while.

"I didn't mean to startle you Are you crying? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Papa, everything is fine. I was already asleep."

"Oh, I am sorry *Puppilein*. I came in to look at you once more, and your head was completely covered by the blanket. I was afraid that you were upset or homesick. I asked Mia what I should do, and she said that I should just ask you," he says, sitting down on the edge of my bed.

"When I go to sleep, I always cover my head with my blanket Papa, ever since

I can remember," I explain. "Everything is just fine. I am very happy to be with you. Go take your nap," I say and reach up to kiss him on his cheek.

The first two weeks fly by. I spend a lot of time with Mia. Papa drives to the office in the morning and doesn't return until dinner-time. Two nights he doesn't return at all because of late appointments in the city. I hope that just being around Mia and seeing how they live will allow me to understand Papa and his life in Italy. Mia says that they both have thick German accents. I tell her that I have long struggled to sound as American as possible, but that a German accent is hard to lose.

Our daily routine starts immediately after breakfast when we make a list and shop for lunch. Lunch is the main, hot meal of the day, as it was in Germany, when I lived with my grandparents.

Mia takes a bag of dried bread and rolls, left over from the previous day, to the poultry shop, where in exchange for the bread, she receives one or two fresh eggs. The bread will be used for chicken feed, she tells me.

At the produce stand, she cautions me not to touch any fruit or vegetables. Only the owner touches the pears and grapes, she explains. I inhale the sweet, fresh perfume of buckets of green basil.

After choosing prosciutto ham slices and veal cutlets, Mia introduces me to the butcher's wife at the cash register. "Our daughter from America," she says. It pleases me that she refers to me as "our."

The last stop is at the dairy, where milk is poured into the bucket I hand a

young boy. Mia selects cheese.

Mia is easy to talk to. I think she wants to be my friend. We keep our conversation to general subjects, avoiding the war years and the subject of my mother. I mention that I have trouble making friends in America, because I get nervous about my language mistakes. Sometimes, my nervousness makes me talk too much, and then I don't get to know the other person.

"Ask them a lot of questions. Give them a chance to talk and listen to their answers," she says. "Also, just smile and be nice, which I am sure you are."

She confides that it took years for Papa and her to make friends in Italy. Most of them speak German and have lived in Italy for many years. I feel that she is treating me like a close friend, and I enjoy our conversations.

The beds and bathroom are already cleaned when we get back from shopping. Gaby is outside playing with other youngsters until lunch time. When I see her, she is snapping her fingers in time to Italian songs on the radio. She gestures to me that she is hungry.

I help Mia and Hilde in the kitchen by washing the greens for our salad, or peeling potatoes, or watching Mia make the spaghetti sauce. An Italian household is so different from anything I've seen, and I never tire of watching and learning more about Papa's life. I can tell that Mia is very diplomatic in the way she talks to Papa. Without confronting him, she gets him to do what she wants. This is such a different style from my mother who is always confrontational.

After lunch one day, Gaby pulls me into her bedroom to show me her draw-

ings of dogs, cats and flowers, which line her walls. Her room is simply furnished, just like the one I sleep in, except her blankets are green-and-white and she has stuffed animals piled on her bed, her chair and on her bookcase. One shelf of her bookcase is reserved for framed photographs. I study them: Gaby petting a cat. Gaby on a swing, pushed by Mia, Gaby with family and friends on a boat. A lump forms in my throat when I look at the largest picture in a narrow silver frame. I take it off the shelf to study it. Gaby, radiating security, sits on a bench next to her mother. Papa stands behind them. His arms are spread protectively around both their shoulders, like a guardian angel. Why couldn't it be me?

Gaby tugs at my hand. I replace the picture and nod my head. She hands me a red crayon to begin coloring a drawing of a vase with flowers. Gaby chatters in Italian.

After a while, my attention wanders out of the window to the shimmering surface of the lake. It is a crystal clear day, and I can see the high mountains mirrored in the water. This could have been my life, I idly daydream. Would I like to be an Italian? How different it would have been if Papa had taken mother and me out of Germany. A small motorboat is stirring the water. Two people are spread on a towel at the tip, enjoying the warm sun. Soon I will be gone from here, I sadly realize, evaporated like a little, foam-capped wave.

On a Saturday morning as I come down the stairs, clattering sounds lure me into the kitchen. Papa is busy, preparing *Hoppel Poppel*, a German break-

fast treat of potatoes, onions, hot dogs and eggs. No one may help him when he prepares this specialty, Mia cautions playfully. Finally, all the ingredients are fried in one big pan. Everyone compliments Papa for preparing the best mix ever. Because I've never tasted *Hoppel Poppel* before, I can only tell him how much I enjoy his breakfast.

Papa goes onto the terrace to smoke a cigarette and read an Italian newspaper. Impatient to finally see her, I ask Papa about Luciana, the Italian doll he wrote about when I lived in Berlin with Oma.

"Oh Luciana...", he says, a tight smile on his face. "Well, ... Gaby found her in a closet... long ago, and I didn't have the heart to deny her the doll."

"I still want to see her," I say, smoothing out my skirt, so he won't see the disappointment on my face. Oma used to say that my face can't hide any thoughts.

He returns carrying a scraggly-haired doll with the most angelic face. With a trace of disapproval in his voice, he says, "You've outgrown dolls anyway, haven't you?"

No I haven't, I think, as tears burn under my eyelids and I feel a hot flush from my neck down to my toes. Carefully, I take Luciana from him and run the tips of my fingers lovingly over her face. With the palm of my hand, I try to put her snarled, black hair in order. I love the feel of her curled, long black eyelashes.

"Luciana," I say silently. "My Italian princess, I've loved you since Papa wrote me that you were waiting for me. You've meant so much to me. Even Oma loved you. She and I used to fantasize what color dresses she and I would sew for you. Papa

doesn't understand.... And I don't want him to think that I'm still a baby who wants a doll when I'm almost 16 years old... I do want you, though." I have to admit to myself that I feel jealous that Gaby has my father and my doll... It's too late now. The doll is tattered, she is missing one of her gold hoop earrings. My heart feels heavy, and my throat aches from holding in sobs. I hand her back and say that she is very pretty and does look Italian, just as he had written me long ago.

"We can shop for a doll for you on our trip to Germany next week. We are leaving on Monday morning. Just the two of us," he says in soft tones. He tips my head back with his finger forcing my face up and exposing dripping tears. He leans over and kisses my forehead and shrugs his shoulders helplessly.

I feel sad for him and myself. I leave the room quickly, calling, "I'll be right back," over my shoulder. I run up into the bathroom to throw cold water on my cheeks and eyes. "You're going to be punished for being jealous of your little sister," I warn my reflection and dab more water on my face. I don't go back to Papa. Instead, I enter my bedroom to crawl under the covers. My mind is in turmoil.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

TOGETHER AT LAST

As Papa and I bounce up the street in his Fiat, I look back at Mia, bathed in sunlight, smiling and throwing kisses. It is a bright, beautiful Monday morning, and I feel as if my happiness could allow me to grow wings. Papa laughs at my grimace when the sun shines in my eyes. He hands me a pair of dark sunglasses.

"Wear these, they are a spare. You are welcome to them," he says.

I gaze up through the blue lenses, toward the hills, where tiny homes dot the mountainside. They look very peaceful, as if they belong to the mountains and have always been a part of them.

"Tell me about our trip," I say, not really caring where we are going, just hoping we'll be together for a long time.

"We'll drive through the mountains for a while into Switzerland. Then we'll drive some more until we reach our final destination, which is Cologne, Germany," he says. Glancing at me sideways, he asks, "Happy?"

"Oh, yes," I say. "Very."

"Me, too," he says, lighting a cigarette. "I am glad we have this opportunity to be together for a while. We need time to talk; there is so much to cover. It gives me a chance to get to know you, and you a chance to get to know me. It took a great deal of courage for you to come to me," he says, clearing his throat, "and I almost don't

know where to begin."

"Since I last saw you in Berlin, I've always wanted to know what happened to you after you watched me play hopscotch on the street ... I remember that I wanted so much to run across the street to talk to you... I'm not sure what held me back... I think you held your hand up to stop me Sometimes, when I think about those years, it does seem like something I dreamt," I say, picturing the scene again.

"Well, let me backtrack a bit. A couple of days before I actually saw you, I was on my way to visit you. I remember that I was walking on the street and looked across a city square -- You know, the kind with benches and a couple of trees -- and I saw Ali walking Zito. He must have gotten him from Paul Schmidt. You remember our German shepherd Zito, of course?"

"Uh huh," I sigh, "I still have the picture that mother took of you and me together in front of the *Tiergarten*."

"Yes, I wish I had a copy of it. Anyway, Zito stopped in his tracks. He must have sniffed my scent, because suddenly, he tore away from Ali's grip and raced across the square towards me. With his tail wagging like crazy, he was licking my hand. I stroked his head quickly, but pulled my body away from him, saying, 'No,' sternly, because I was afraid of calling attention to myself. You know how those years were: Everyone was always watching and reporting anything unusual to the authorities. Besides, I didn't want Ali to see me so I wouldn't endanger him. As it was, a passerby, turned to watch the dog and me and, as I recall, I shrugged my shoulders at the man, shook my head and walked on. As I rounded the next corner, I saw Ali running to reach the leash." He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand as

if to brush away the memory. "Zito was the least of my problems," he says, but I took that incident as a bad omen and didn't go to see you that day. By the way, did Ali ever mention that he saw me?"

"I don't remember," I say impatiently. "Tell me what happened to you. And why did the Gestapo come for me?" He shakes his head with a puzzled look.

"You don't even know that they came for me?" I ask.

"You wrote me once something about being taken out of the house in a rug, but I never understood what that was all about."

No, he doesn't know. How could he? We never talked to each other again. Because Papa and mother don't correspond, how could he know about anything that happened to us in Germany. At his insistence, I recount the Gestapo's visit with me in Oma's bedroom, followed by Tante Gerda and mother's arrest. I tell him how Oma hid me in the closet and Opa carried me in a rug to the Schultzes for safe-keeping. Papa appears shaken by what he hears and says that he feels very bad that everyone had to suffer because of him. He takes my hand and kisses it. I tell him that neither Opa nor anyone else could understand why the Gestapo's search for him was so intense. "We were terrified," I say, "and poor mother was imprisoned again and tortured, because she didn't know where you were. It was very unfair. You had already left the country with Mia, while mother suffered."

He looks very serious as he says, "I know that it wasn't fair. Nothing was fair in those days. Hitler and his followers turned so many lives upside down. Nothing was the way it should have been. Survival was the most important factor."

"Opa and Oma saved my life. Rudi Löwenthal's life too. But that's another

story and I want to hear yours first," I say.

"Well, it was November of '44. I had heard through the grapevine, that a number of people I knew were arrested by the Gestapo. Rudi Löwenthal, by the way, was one of them. All in all, about 10 people I knew were caught. They had been living in hiding or managed with falsified identification papers like Mia and me. So, to gather more information about these latest arrests and to see about getting new papers, I drove Paul Schmidt's truck to a man's house. The man, Kurt something -- I've forgotten his last name -- had helped us in the past to get different types of I.D. papers. On that day I figured that because various police stations had been bombed and their files had been destroyed, it was an opportunity to get new papers that couldn't get traced It sounds complicated, I know."

"Uncle Rudi was arrested in front of a man named Kurt's house the same month. I know because he escaped from the prison and came to Oma's house. They saved him by hiding him in the coal cellar and sending food down with Tante Gerda," I say. "He stayed with us until the war was over."

"He was lucky that Gerda loved him.... She saved his life. And her wonderful parents."

"Yes, he was. Unfortunately, he's a miser and has forgotten how good she was to him," I say regretfully. "But go on. I'll tell you more about Rudi later."

"Well, anyway, I walked upstairs to the second floor and knocked on Kurt's door without knowing that he, too, had been arrested. And, suddenly... I'll never forget ... two Gestapo officials in full-length, black-leather coats opened the door and asked for my papers, including my drivers license. They said that from the window

they had watched me arrive by car. I was stunned... My license was in the name of Ert, and I was immediately arrested and led out onto the street, *Wilhelm Strasse*," he says, lighting another cigarette and puffing smoke into the air.

"How terrible," I whisper. "The Gestapo just waited around Kurt's place, and all the people they couldn't find showed up sooner or later."

"Exactly. But luckily they didn't frisk me for weapons.... I suppose they didn't suspect that a Jew would carry a weapon."

We stop for a herd of cattle crossing the road. The shepherd is yelling at the cattle in Italian, guiding them to a higher meadow. But I am not as interested in the cattle, farms or scenic views we pass, as I am in hearing Papa's story.

"I always carried one or two revolvers on me," he continues, his eyes glinting at me with a hint of mischief. "The Ert name was known because I had escaped two years earlier, and, they suspected me of espionage. I did pass information, sometimes, to an English agent stationed in Berlin. So," he says with a typically Italian shrug of the shoulders, "I had to 'dare' to save my life, which wasn't worth one penny at the time I waited for 'my moment.'"

"It came when one guy left to get the car, and I was left with the man who was pointing a gun at me.... He looked away for just a split second ... I knocked the gun out of his hand and jumped across the rubble wall of a burned-out house. As you know, ruins were everywhere. I soon heard shots and found some cover among the ruins, where I threw myself to the ground to return their fire. I shot with both my pistols drawn at those pigs, and got one." He sends me a triumphant smile over his shoulder, and I can tell that he enjoys impressing me.

"How could you tell that you shot someone?" I ask in awe.

"Well I'm quite sure that I got one, because for a while the shooting totally stopped from one direction. Of course, I didn't wait around for long; instead, I raced through the ruins, into other ruins, across courtyards and over roofs. I managed to escape, just like in a movie. And imagine, it was the middle of the day, right on the *Wilhelms Strasse*." He looks at me thoughtfully and says, "Had they gotten me, I would have shot as many as I could before taking my own life."

"I can understand that," I say. "You would have been better off dead, than to get caught by the Gestapo."

"So that was why your mother was arrested, as well as Gerda, and my friend Paul Schmidt, the owner of the truck I drove. I am sure he told the Gestapo that I had stolen the truck, because that was the plan we had concocted if ever he was questioned. That man and his wife took an immense chance to stay friends with me. To help me. What a wonderful man. And not Jewish." He takes a deep breath...

"Have you talked to him since?" I ask. "I remember Herr Schmidt kissed my hand when I sat in his big fry pan in the restaurant kitchen," I say, smiling at the memory of precious time spent with Papa during the war.

"I'm surprised at how much you remember Vivi. Really, you impress me," he says, causing me to smile with happiness. "Yes, after the war I wrote Paul to let him know that we had survived. We still occasionally correspond. He says that he'll come to Italy one of these days. I hope so; I owe him my life, for not turning me in," Papa says thoughtfully. "By the way, I know that I'm telling you all this in a way that makes me sound as if I was fearless. But that is not true. Surviving among the

enormous hazards was hell. Pure hell.... Avoiding street checks for illegal Jews or war deserters. Any man who could still walk on two legs was questioned as a possible war deserter. And the ever-prowling catchers -- spotters, who, to save their own skin for a while, turned from once ordinary people into spies It's beyond words, just beyond," he says with a grim face.

"Okay, back to Berlin. Having gotten away from the Gestapo that day, I came to *Wörther Strasse*, just hoping that you were on the street. I wouldn't have gone upstairs because a neighbor might have seen me and that could have caused trouble for the family. Anyway, I just wanted to look at you. I knew that after that day, I would never dare see you again. Once the Gestapo got themselves mobilized, I figured that they would watch Oma's building. And so, I had to have my last look at my child," he says, turning to me with a soft smile. I feel loved and my eyes fill with moisture.

"You were right not to cross the street to me. The other children might have noticed me and that would have endangered you.

" I gathered only emergency clothing at my apartment -- the small suitcase was always packed -- and I went to a sewer pipe that I had found some time before as an emergency hiding place. It was useful particularly when it didn't rain. I left everything we owned behind and I waited for Mia. If she couldn't find me at home ... eventually this pipe was where we'd meet. We had bought furniture for our apartment and ...

"Is that the apartment that had the blue-and-yellow-flowered curtain in front

of a bed with a mirror that hung over the bed," I ask. "And there were matching pillows?"

"Why yes, I believe that's true. How do you know? Did Mia tell you?"

"No, I have a vague memory of that apartment and the mirror. I remember looking at myself in that mirror and seeing you and Mia," I say.

"Very strange that you remember that. I don't even remember introducing you to Mia ... but you do describe the curtains ... "

"Go on, Papa," I urge.

"Obviously, I had to leave Germany," he says, lighting another cigarette and asking if I am hungry for lunch.

"Whenever you say," I answer, ignoring the rumbling in my stomach.

"We are almost there," he promises and pulls into a lane behind other cars, waiting to cross the border into Switzerland. The border crossing formalities do not take long. As we drive another 20 minutes or so, Papa tells me about the virtues of the restaurant at which we will eat. Then he stops the car. Stretching and easing our sore muscles, we pass through a brick-walled garden of cascading vines and enter a sunny room. The dining room is filled with tables and chairs that look as if they had been handcrafted for a gingerbread house. When we are seated, a gruff-looking waitress comes for our order. Papa asks me if he may order for me while I go to wash my hands. On the way to the bathroom I stop to admire the colorful porcelain plates hanging on the walls.

I look at myself in the mirror and with wet hands, pinch both my cheeks to

give me color and to remind myself that this is really happening. It is not a dream. I am in Switzerland with my father, hearing his history. We have lots of time together. Alone. Just the two of us.

When I return to the table Papa is reaching for the coarsely sliced bread in a covered basket. We keep our conversation on lighter subjects, and wait for meatloaf, dumplings and red cabbage.

When Papa lights his cigarette, after lunch, I feel that enough time has passed for me to bring him back to his escape from Berlin. I ask Papa just how hard it is for him to relive the past. He sighs deeply and turns to look at me. He is smiling at me in the strangest way. "Nothing is too hard when I can share it with you finally," he says and continues.

"I had an acquaintance, an Italian man named Guido Morcetti, who worked in the Italian embassy in Berlin."

"How did you know him?" I ask.

"Well your father is a friendly sort of person who always knew how to make a living. When I met your mother, I was peddling pencils."

"Yes, mother recently mentioned that you once sold pencils."

"She probably told you that for a young Jew there wasn't much work available. So, I forgot how it came about exactly, but I took packs of pencils to businesses, got them to buy them and eventually expanded to other office supplies. My talent, if I have one, is that I can strike up a conversation with anyone and keep talking. Anyway, I met Morcetti one evening in a cafe. I don't remember how long I

had known him when I needed him. Anyway, I went to see him. I told him everything -- even that I was a Jew, which he didn't know up to that point. It wasn't something one advertised, as you know.... Even now, I never refer to myself as a Jew. Our acquaintances in Italy have no idea what our religion is. Well, maybe they have an idea, but it is never discussed," he says, almost to himself.

I nod in agreement because I, too, don't feel comfortable when religion is discussed. I am unsure of what I am or what I should feel. Papa has finished his cup of coffee and paid the check, and we link arms and walk back to the car. Papa says that there is a lot of road to cover. I ask him to please continue.

"I think that I could have gotten out of Berlin at an earlier time, with Morcetti's help, but I kept hoping that the Nazis would crash. And then I wanted to be around to settle some scores. Final scores."

"You'd shoot them?" I ask.

"Well, I hadn't thought it through, but.... " His eyes narrow, "I call it retribution."

The small muscles in his jaw are jumping, and the veins in his temple are pressing hard against his skin, as though they want to pop out. I stroke his shoulder with my hand, hoping to ease his tension.

"Mia and I spent a couple of days and nights hiding in the sewer that previously we had used only as an emergency. One day, while searching for hiding places, I had discovered a large sewer by a canal, with a high ledge on which we could climb and sit without fear of getting our feet wet or getting swept along with

rushing waters. Mia was terribly afraid of rats, but luckily she never saw one.

"We ate rations that I had stored in the apartment and, of course, I first called Morcetti to let him know how urgent our situation was. Within three or four days, Mia and I resided in the basement of the embassy. Morcetti provided us with very good documents. I'll show them to you when we get back. The papers identified me as an Italian lieutenant and Mia as my secretary. So, suddenly, I was an Italian officer without knowing one word of Italian. The papers were excellent quality, with passport-type photos of Mia and me. So, I now had diplomatic papers," he says with satisfaction in his voice. "German papers, allowing us to exit Germany and enter Italy on a government mission."

"He gave you papers just out of friendship?" I ask.

"No," he chuckles, flashing a quick smile. "Not for friendship. It cost me approximately 50,000 mark. I gave him most of Mia's jewels from her winter coat seams. My head was more important to me than the money.

"I never talked to any German again. I struck a match to any papers or photographs that could tie us to our background and took only the few clothes we had -- some underwear, stockings and socks. Mia wore one tweed wool suit and carried a spare navy suit, with two blouses, some sweaters, her hat, gloves and precious coat. Me, I wore Italian military pants with German, Gestapo-type boots. I always wore military-style, black boots just like the Gestapo." With pride I smile at his words. "That's my father, my hero," I think to myself.

"Only the Gestapo wore long, black leather coats, with their shiny, boots,"

he says. "Morcetti gave me a military jacket that was covered with decorations. I looked like an Italian war hero with all those medals and striped bars.

"On the 30th of November, Mia and I -- or should I say, Maria Bertoni and Giacomo Simonetti, our Italian names -- arrived at the Berlin train station headed for Milan, Italy. If you are wondering how much I knew about Italy, the answer is zero. I was about thirty seven years old at the time and had lived under Hitler's shadow for most of my adult life. For me, nothing had ever been easy," he says, inhaling his cigarette and making small smoke rings with pursed lips.

"Papa?" I say. His gaze returns to me with a blank expression.

"Would you rather not talk for a while?" I ask.

After a long pause, he continues with a sigh. "We entered a small room where a young German officer sat behind a desk. He looked our papers over and asked me why we were leaving Berlin. I said that as my papers state, I have to go to Milan on a secret mission for the German government.

'I haven't received any notification of your departure and don't have the authority to let you depart,' he said, reaching for the telephone. 'I must check with my commander.'

"If you dare to question the commander about my papers, you must be willing to suffer the consequences,' I said to him in as authoritative a tone of voice as I could muster. In my mind however, I was imploring him, filled with nothing but utter fear.

"Meantime, brilliant Mia removes a precious pair of silk stockings from her

carrying case and nonchalantly checks them against the ceiling light, in view of the officer. She casually comments that if he has a girl friend or wife, he might wish to give her brand new pair of silk stockings. The officer dropped his hand from the telephone and fingered the stockings that Mia had placed in front of him.

"He stamped our exit papers. We left his office and boarded the train.

"The ride was long and uncomfortable. We traveled in a second-class compartment because that was all that was available. Every seat in our compartment was occupied by Italians. I think that they were suspicious of us, because in my hero's jacket I looked much too important to travel second class with them. They offered us sandwiches, which I would have loved to have eaten; but since I couldn't speak Italian, I shook my head and never looked at them. We were frozen ... frozen with fear. Mia and I ate whatever food we had brought; cheese, biscuits, tins of sardines, dry black bread and apples. It was not easy for so many days, but we never, not even for one second, forgot how truly fortunate we were. So our hunger somehow didn't touch us.

"We spent much of the trip standing in the aisle so we could whisper to each other. Finally, the train reached the Brenner pass. You and I will use that pass on our present trip. At the border, a belligerent swiss guard and, incidentally, all the guards are fluent in French, German and Italian, checked my passport and ID papers and questioned me. For some reason he didn't question Mia, but something about me bothered him.

'How come you have an Italian name but answer me in perfect German, even

when I address you in Italian?' he asked me. I explained that although I was born in Bologna, my Italian parents brought me up in Germany where I worked for Italy in the Italian Embassy.

'You don't even pronounce your birth city properly,' he scolded. 'The g is not pronounced. 'It's time for you to study your Italian, Officer Giacometti,' he said, looking me over carefully."

"He could have made you go back, couldn't he?" I ask.

"I suppose so. Anything was possible in those days. Everyone was suspicious of everyone... I was just thinking how naive I was when we arrived in Milan. It was December 11. Believe me, we were pretty stiff from 12 days of train riding.

"We got off the train and passed a man sitting on a bench in the station reading a German-Swiss newspaper. He looked Swiss to me in his loden-green jacket and cap I don't know why, he just looked Swiss. So, in German, I asked him for directions and information. I had no idea where to go, or stay or how to speak to anyone.

"He invited us for a cup of coffee. He said his train to Lugano, Switzerland wasn't due for three hours. I was so relieved to be out of Germany and danger that while chatting, I casually mentioned that Mia and I wanted to immigrate to Palestine. That shocked him, and he warned me not to repeat that to anyone else.

'Don't trust anybody,' he said. 'It's a good thing that you met me. Italy is full of fascists and Nazis.' I took his warning to heart, and that was the last time that I voluntarily mentioned my religion to anyone."

After a long silence, Papa says that we are nearing the train that will take us through the Brenner Pass. Years ago, a huge tunnel was blasted through mountains so the railroad could pass through, Papa explains. Passengers with cars can drive onto a railway car, park and walk into the train for the rest of the passage. While we are at the station, I see some postcards on the counter of a snack bar and decide to buy one to send to mother. During the train ride, as Papa sips from a glass of whiskey, I carefully compose my thoughts.

Dear Mutti,

I had a good, but very long flight to Italy. It is very pretty here, but totally different from Germany or America. I recognized Papa right away, and he recognized me. Although he looks shorter and older than I remembered, he is still very handsome.

We are on a trip to Cologne, where he has clients to visit.

I hope you are well and that the summer isn't too hot for you. If you see Ida, give her my regards. Papa said that he will buy me a bathing suit when we get back to the Azzano house.

Take care of yourself. I'll will see you in a short time again,

Love, Vivi

I double-check my card to make sure that I didn't mention Mia or Gaby's

name, or write anything that would make mother mad at me. After all, my summer in Italy will not last forever, and I will still have to get along with her.

At the end of the train ride, Papa adds, "Regards from Hans," to my card. He pastes a stamp on it and drops it into the mailbox outside the station. Then we are off again, driving along mountainous roads, weaving through small villages, honking the horn at every curve.

"How are you getting along with your mother?" Papa asks me.

"She is a little difficult," I say, wondering how much to tell him. I don't think that he knows much about my time in Westchester, and I don't want him to think that I am crazy or confused. So I hear myself saying that she works very hard and that that makes her short-tempered.

"She was always short-tempered," he adds with certainty.

"I wish that we were closer. It seems to me that we should be. But we aren't. And I have tried," I add quickly.

"She is a complicated little person. Insecure. Selfish, which, I have been told, I am too." He pauses, his head tilted to one side. His eyes scrutinize mine. "I know that war or no war -- Mia or no Mia -- I could never have stayed with her.... Unfortunately. But, I've got to give her credit, too. She had courage, maybe more courage than sense for marrying me.... Her laugh is infectious but we were not a good match. Although we made you, and I am very proud of you, *Puppilein*," he says. A tear trickles out of the corner of my eyes. I lay my head against his chest as he places his arm around my shoulder. My life was created by two people who don't

really like each other. Mother refers to him as an unbearable egotist and womanizer, and Papa thinks that mother has a nice laugh but is basically impossible. My eyes gaze at brown cattle grazing among old rocks and boulders that are covered with moss. I think about the people who made me. I'd like to feel anger towards them but at least I am alive. They are what they are I am what I am.

We are quiet for a long while, following our private thoughts, until Papa mentions that the blue sky has vanished and gray clouds are a solid layer above us. The first drops hit the windshield as we pass a beeping truck. The wind has kicked up, as well. Trees are bending over as if in agony. Oncoming headlights are blurred. The downpour is so heavy that the windshield wipers can't clear a view.

"I wish the rain had waited," Papa moans. It sweeps over us in solid sheets, pounding the roof and pounding at the windows. "We'll have to stop at the next village for the night," he says. "The mountain roads are too treacherous when it gets dark, anyway."

As he maneuvers the car, I hear a sharp thunder-bolt crack. Papa's body jumps in fright. "Thunderstorms frighten me," he says. I suppose that is a residue of the sound of bombs falling during the war."

I tell him that I, too, frighten easily when sudden noises occur. At school, I've been embarrassed by my terrified reaction to sudden sounds. Usually, the person I am with doesn't seem to even notice the sound that alarms me.

As crashes rumble and echo in the mountains surrounding us, Papa cautiously stops the car in front of a sign, announcing the "Edelweiss Inn." He

registers us for the night. The inn-keeper, a short, stout man wearing an oversized green apron that reaches the tips of his shoes, welcomes us. Papa asks for two adjoining rooms in German. He says the inn-keeper understands Italian, French and English as well. Our rooms are simply furnished. We share a bathroom.

Dinner is served at seven. The menu is roast chicken and spaetzle, which Papa explains is a tiny dumpling that I will like. Our food is delicious. We share the long, rectangular dining table with other stranded guests. There is a couple from San Francisco, traveling with their 12 year-old daughter, Stephanie. I ask them if they've met a German mother and daughter by the name of Helga and Eva in San Francisco, but they shake their heads and say "no."

After dinner, Stephanie and I work on a complicated, musical-instrument puzzle, while Papa sips a whiskey and practices speaking broken English on her patient parents.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

".... THE ETERNAL ONE IS OUR GOD "

I hear Papa moving about and get out of my bed quickly. The door is ajar and Papa, wrapped up in a white ferry-cloth robe, is moving his suitcase off the floor and onto the bed.

"Good morning, Vivi," he says.

"It's so good to hear your voice," I answer.

"It's wonderful for me to hear yours, *Puppilein*, but right now, I am about to shave."

Unwilling to give up any time with him, I sit down on the covered toilet seat as he dips the brown shaving brush over a round bowl of soap. Standing in front of the sink, his feet slightly apart, he looks like Santa Claus, once the white foam covers his face. I watch his face in the mirror as he holds his skin taut and begins to shave from the ear down, pursing his lips. He looks at my reflection in the mirror, turns, and playfully dabs my nose with foam. Without removing the foam, I intently watch every move he makes, while absentmindedly brushing my hair. Satisfied, after a final finger test of his chin, he smiles and says that we need to be on the road within an hour because Cologne is still far away.

I reflect that this is the first time I've ever seen my father shave. Other

children take that totally for granted, for me it is very special to have seen him shave, wear a robe, comb his hair. These little intimate peeks at him I will cherish and cling to when we are no longer together. In my mind, I am constantly clicking pictures of him, photographs for the future to ponder and remember.

The trees are dripping with moisture. Deep puddles have formed by the road from the downpour that lasted all night. The morning is partly cloudy with slim rays of sunshine, and I can admire the ivy-covered building where we spent the night. The views are magnificent as we drive past green fields, scattered cottages, and grazing cows and sheep. There is no fast expressway taking us through the mountains; instead, the car is steadily climbing, winding around and around narrow roads. At times, I feel as if we are at the top of the world.

"Pinch me and tell me that this isn't a dream, Papa. Tell me we are really together."

"It's no dream," he answers, smiling happily.

"I've dreamt it so often, for so many years, that it still seems unreal to me," I admit.

"Vivi, believe me I, too, worried about you all these years," he says, hesitantly. "I've never forgotten my daughter. Please believe me." I study his face and wonder if he is really sincere. Papa lets me scrutinize his face and rests gentle, affectionate eyes on me.

"I tried to do what I could. We didn't have a lot either, but ... I tried," he says.

"It is hard for me," I explain. "I don't want to feel jealous of anyone, especially of my little eight-year-old sister. I'm almost 16, so I know how unreasonable it is of me to feel any ... Oh, I don't even know what I feel. I just don't want to feel like an outsider in my father's life."

"I am so glad that you are here. And Mia is too. You never were, are, nor will be an outsider in my life," he says, reassuringly patting my hand.

"All right," I say, wanting to have time to think about his words. I do understand that he couldn't have taken me when he left Germany. I am old enough to understand that that was impossible.

"That reminds me," Papa says, "reach behind me for my briefcase and pull out the large brown envelope. It contains a copy of a letter my parents wrote my sisters in Palestine in 1939. You never met the girls because they left Germany in 1934."

My Dear Children,

Berlin, September 1939

Dr. Arthur Loewenherz, you have his address in Haifa, wrote his sister yesterday, that he is trying to organize a transport of children out of Berlin. He wrote her that a boarding school in Haifa will accept the children. Dr. Loewenherz wants his sister to send him the addresses of 26 children up to age 15.

We want to send Hanni, although she is sixteen and a half. Possibly, she

could pass as the children's supervisor. She likes children and works well with them. Eventually, Hanni could join your Kibbutz in Haifa or stay in the boarding school to continue her education in languages. We know three families that want to send their children. Contact Dr. L. immediately and let us know how much it will cost and what official papers are needed. You must tell Dr. L. that neither we, nor the other families, have any money for the transport. Everything is taking too long. We are running out of time....

As I wrote you in my last letter, Maurice Teitz, your mother's cousin's husband, has managed to get two families out of Berlin. He likes Hanni and wants to get her to London. He is trying to get children into

Holland or London ... using London as a stop on the way to Haifa.

Possibly, we too might get to Palestine by way of London since we could probably stay with the Teitzs in their flat in London. We'll see

Hans, Elli, Ali and the baby are living with us. Vivi is 11 months old and adorable. Hans is trying to get to Holland and stay with my cousin Heddy. But -- nothing is definite and there is just a small chance. For Hans and family there is practically no opportunity to get out. It's very serious because we all are running out of options.

My cousin Herta did get to Australia, fortunately, they had some money.

Other wise, we are well and hope you are too. For today, best regards

and kisses --

Your father

My hands tremble as I fold the pages my Opa Ert wrote and insert them back into the brown envelope. For a while, Papa and I are lost in our own thoughts. The letter is a desperate voice from the past. It also reassures me that Papa did want all of us to leave together. Mother never told me that. Sadly it was too late for everyone

"Tell me more about your escape from Berlin," I say after a silent hour has passed.

"You understand that I don't like to talk about the old days. In fact, Mia and I never do. As you can see by my father's letter, the times were really terrible.... Of course, it's different between us. We need to talk it all out ... at least once ... then we can go on," he says, pushing a strand of hair out of his eyes.

"I don't talk about the past either, so much of it is dark and unhappy," I say. "There is no one to talk to, anyway. Mother is always preoccupied with her life and when she sees me, I seem to remind her of undone chores; wash the laundry, walk the dogs, scour the bathroom, iron my blouse, dust the apartment, etc. etc. Sometimes, I feel like a built-in maid." I complain.

"Yes," he chuckles. "I remember that she's good at handing out assignments, but," he snaps his cigarette lighter open, "she's had a very hard life. But ... haven't we all," he says, slowly allowing smoke to escape his curved lips.

"I think that she loves me because I am a part of you and hates me for the same reason," I say bitterly. "She's very hard to understand."

"Yes," he admits, "That's Elli." His tone is judgmental.

After a long silence, Papa says, "All right, back to Milan and 1944- the Swiss man in the railroad station. After reminding me to forget my past and to never tell anyone my story, he recommended that we check into the "Hotel Atlantic" across the street from the railway station. Lots of temporary guests stay there, he said, and since he had just checked out, we could probably get a room. Then, he urged me to go to the men's room to remove my military jacket before leaving the station. That was good advice."

"What made you choose Italy in the first place?" I ask him.

"My British link decided that Italy was good. As far as the English were concerned, Italy had turned from ally to enemy, which activated British intelligence in Italy. Also, fortunately, I was acquainted with Guido. My English link figured that I could survive in Italy, plus continue my intelligence service for them. They were more concerned about their interests than in my hide." He smiles softly, "Of course, I had to pay for everything myself, without English help; but if I could hurt the Germans in any way, that was enough satisfaction for me."

"The expenses were great -- our false papers, tickets, food and hotels. We had given Morcetti some of Mia's jewels, which he converted into Italian lire and Swiss francs for us."

"How come Mia had jewels?" I ask.

"Her maiden name is Goldfarb. Her father and his ancestors had all been goldsmiths in Berlin. They lost their business to the Nazis of course, and most of the jewels and money that they had. But her father, long before things got really bad in the mid- 30th, sent the three younger children to Palestine -- Lydia and the twins Helmut and Hilde. At the same time, he began to bring home unset stones, pearls and gold necklaces. Her father told Mia to sew the gold ropes into the hem of her winter coat and to spread precious stones into the collar and cuffs. And that is the coat that has helped us stay alive. Plus, not to brag, but I've always known how to make a living."

"Do you know what happened to Mia's parents?"

"They were sent to a concentration camp, I suppose. I am certain that they are dead."

After a long silence he continues. "As I told you, we arrived in Milan on December 9, 1944 -- a date I remember very well. I remember other dates as well -- dots along the course of my life that are filled with personal meaning and memories. Once a year I allow myself to remember the events of that day. Sometimes my memories make me feel like an old man of 85 or even older on a bad day.

"Well enough of that," he says with a sigh. "We checked into the hotel the Swiss man from the train station recommended and got a room that, fortunately, included a hot plate and skimpy kitchen stuff for light cooking. On our first night in Italy, we went to a neighborhood Trattoria for a bite. As we walked into the

restaurant, following the host to a table for two, we passed a large rectangular table occupied by a group of at least eight or nine German military officers....

"Poor Mia practically fainted at the sight of all those uniforms, and frankly, I, too, was petrified. My first desire was to run away and hide. But I couldn't do that. So, instead, I ordered a carafe of wine by pointing to one on the next table. Then I excused myself and told Mia that I had to go over to the officers. She begged me not to go but I explained that I needed to befriend them, because they were the only ones who spoke our language. We knew nothing about our surroundings, and they did. We had to survive in a strange country, and I had no pencils to sell," he says with a chuckle. "As a young boy, I used to help my father bake cakes and rolls in his bakery, but without language skills ... it was frightening."

"So," he says, with a faint smile on his lips, "with wobbly legs and trembling hands, I approached their table, forcing my courage to grow as I got closer to greet the German officers. Dressed in wrinkled Italian military pants and wrinkled civilian jacket, I introduced myself as a Berliner, working on a secret mission.

"They were very cordial and invited me to sit down with them and have a drink. After a while, I waved Mia over and introduced her as my aide and secretary. They talked, and I listened. Like a turtle receding into its shell, I used my secret mission as an excuse whenever their questions were too probing. Over the next couple of weeks, we actually got to be quite friendly. In the evenings, we'd meet in the same Tratoria for dinner. They always picked up the check, and I heard many interesting bits of information, useful for a future meeting with English

intelligence. Primarily though, I felt like a bird without wings ... hardly able to help myself, much less the English. I didn't even know if I'd ever speak to them again to pass them information."

"What name did you give the Germans?" I ask.

"My Italian name. I told them that my mission forbade me to give them any other information. I told them the same story, about being born in Bologna and growing up in Berlin and feeling like a Berliner. I confided in them that I needed some stuff to sell, that it would give me mobility for my mission; and shortly thereafter, my German 'friends' provided me with two used auto tires. Another time they had a spare roll of cable, and, occasionally, a can of gasoline. You'd be surprised how much stuff I sold," he says proudly, "and these small triumphs supported my mind. I imagined I had an unseen enemy -- hopelessness. Sometimes it overcame me with a deadly force, fearing that our life of hiding would go on and on and on.... Then I forced myself into a rage ... just to fight the numb terror that would overwhelm me."

"I left Mia alone a lot. It was better that way. She'd cook a potato soup or do our laundry in the tiny washbasin. It was easier for me to operate alone, and I had to protect her from my fears and from life....

"Sometimes, I enjoyed bull-shitting the Germans -- excuse the expression -- pulling them around by the nose, hinting without saying anything. It was like a tiny mouse leading a roaring tiger. They liked to drink quite a bit and would get tipsy and talkative. I limited myself to one or two glasses of wine. But Mia didn't enjoy the

men at all. Talking to them made her want to throw up while frankly, after my initial fears, I forced myself to learn to enjoy them... without ever forgetting that they were my enemy - a deadly enemy. "

"So you used them without their knowing it," I say with pride.

"Indeed, I did. All the while, under the sole of my right boot was a slip of paper in English, stating that Hans Ert -- by the way, the only place my real name was ever mentioned -- is in the service of the British government.

He pauses, "In fact, I played my role so well, that when, at long last, the war went badly for the Germans and it looked like the end was coming, my German 'friends' offered me two seats on their transport truck -- one for Mia and one for me -- to join them 'to return to our beloved Fatherland.'"

"I told them that, more than ever, I had to stay and complete my mission. So they left me some canned food provisions and three auto tires and that was that. But, by then, four months had passed, and I was more at ease in our surroundings. Besides, I had made some other contacts, two Austrian men, Herr Hartkleft, and his friend Herr Ehlers, and somehow we managed. Mia is a very frugal cook and really knows how to stretch money. Much better than me," he shrugs. "Somehow, we got by....

"And then, finally, the war was over, and Germany had lost everything.

"One day, the hotel guests were really loud, jabbering and shouting gleefully. The hotel keeper, with a huge grin on his face, pretended to cut his throat while pointing to a picture of Benito Mussolini, the fascist leader in Italy who was in cahoots with Hitler," Papa says. "I later found out Italian patriots caught him and his

mistress as they were trying to escape Italy along a country road near Azzano, as a matter of fact; and they were both hung. Even today, you can see a black cross painted on the stone wall by a path near our house. The two corpses were brought to Milan and publicly hung by their feet in a square.

"My war was finally over. I always knew that I had to survive, and would survive. Once, I thought that I was a German. I wanted to be German and also a Jew. But that was now over, and I just wanted to live with Mia, have the right to marry, earn a living

"One day, in the spring of '45, shortly after the end of the war, we were walking on the street, probably shopping for some groceries, when Mia jabs me with her elbow and points. I guess that she was too shocked to speak, because pulled over to the curb was a military jeep with a painted blue-and-white Jewish star on the jeep door. I wanted to ignore the jeep and told her to just keep on walking. I was afraid.

"But Mia insisted on approaching the jeep. It was curbside, and apparently the driver wanted to study a street map. She asked him in her school-girl English if they were from Palestine. 'Yes,' they answered her. 'We are part of the Liberation Army.'

"You probably don't know that during World War II, Palestine formed partisan parties who spread throughout Europe to try and save Jews. These partisans were called, "The Liberation Army." They were trained by the English in Palestine, and then they were sent throughout the world to save and to liberate. That's why that day we saw Palestinian soldiers in Italy."

"Well, you can imagine our great joy, after years of hiding and terror, to see the Star of David openly displayed, and Jewish boys from Palestine We were overcome." He brushes his hand across his eyes, and I feel tears forming in my eyes, too.

"Mia told the boys --probably 28 or 29 years-old, that she had two sisters living in Palestine -- Hilde and Lydia Goldfarb. The boys said that the name sounded familiar, but they didn't know if they had ever met them. 'Tell you what,' the driver said, 'I'll put an insert in our newspaper in Palestine. It's widely read, because families are always trying to connect with families.' So Mia wrote down her name and our hotel address and the girl's names. Eventually this resulted in Hilde visiting us."

By now, we have crossed the border into Germany and are driving on a busy road, with cars passing us at great speed. Papa points to small farms along the road growing tall plants of staked hops, an ingredient used to make the famous German beer. We stop for gasoline, and he buys us each a long sausage wedged in a hard roll and salty french fries. I think that everything is very tasty, but apparently he doesn't, because he promises me a good dinner when we reach our hotel in Cologne.

Once we are on the road again, Papa turns the radio on to a soft music station. I curl up with my feet tucked beneath me and try to stay awake by reading the road signs. We drive over passes and under train trestles, over bridges crossing rivers and through towns large and small. Maybe I did sleep, because all of a sudden,

Papa announces that we are almost there. I stare at the buildings and glittering store windows and streets crowded with strolling pedestrians. I rub my eyes, gritty with sleep, as Papa shuts off the engine. Almost instantly, a porter holds the door open for me.

"Good afternoon, Fräulein," he says.

I follow Papa as we walk into an enormous hotel lobby filled with potted plants. I gasp at the vast white marble floor sprinkled with gold-trimmed tables and red velvet, tufted easy chairs. How very grand Papa's life is, I think to myself. I picture my bed in New York which I share with the Pullman kitchen, and my narrow window through which I watch Mona and her unfriendly husband.

I have never eaten anywhere with so many pieces of silverware next to my plate. Papa explains that one always starts with the fork or spoon that is farthest from the plate. The table is set with sparkling glasses and very expensive-looking china. Fresh flowers are on the white-clothed table. I imagine myself as truly the princess from Oma's tales, saved by the handsome prince who actually is my father, as I have dreamed so often.

I watch my father pull his reading glasses out of his breast pocket and study the menu. Then he leans toward me to recommend the veal cutlet, sauteed mushrooms and boiled potatoes. It is another scene for my book of memories.

The dinner tastes as wonderful as Papa had predicted. I tell him about my encounter with raw mushrooms, including the stories of Anna and Peter, Martha

and the other children I met at camp after the war.

Papa tests his coffee by sipping a spoonful of it and nods his head appreciatively. He lights a cigarette and smiles softly at me. "We've come a long way, *Puppilein*, haven't we?" he says, reaching for my hand across the table and tracing the scar of my misshapen finger tip, injured during the war.

I sit up straighter and nod my head, feeling overwhelmed by the grandeur of our surroundings and intimidated suddenly by being with my father. At times I feel like I really know him again, and at other times he is still a mysterious stranger. He politely requests more coffee when the waiter returns with my crystal dish of ice cream. I do like understanding the language spoken around me. Although the accent is a little different from the Berliner German that I speak, it's good to feel as if I belong. In New York, as soon as I speak to strangers -- whether in school or elsewhere -- I am usually asked, "Where do you come from?" I like not feeling like a stranger in this city, even though I am.

"Did you stay in the Atlantic Hotel even after the war?" I ask, preferring to talk about the past rather than the present. I know that all this will come to an end, and I will return to mother and her irrational temper, and my bed in the kitchen, and worst of all, Jule. The civilized life I am experiencing will pass very soon, and I will have to say good bye again. So I remind myself to not get too used to all this luxury.

"No, actually the Allies moved into the hotel and requisitioned it for their needs. But first they interviewed all the guests. They were particularly interested in

Mia and myself. In those years, it was not at all rare to find Nazis living in Italy, and the Allies wanted to find and arrest them. This was fine with me. Only they thought that I was one of the Nazis in hiding."

"How could you prove that you weren't?" I ask.

"Well, really, I couldn't. I had no papers. My name was Giacomo Simonetti, and Mia was Maria Bertoni. And we spoke perfect German and practically no Italian. The Ert name was non-existent, other than the slip of paper in my boot, identifying me as an agent. But I could have been a Nazi double agent. And that is exactly what Bill Bolton, the American officer interviewing me, thought. He accused us of being double agents, working for the German government. It also didn't help me that I had been friends with the German military, until they left Milan in a hurry. The hotel owner or other guests probably couldn't wait to give this information to Bolton. I don't blame anyone for that. I would have done the same thing, no doubt.

"It was my smart Mia who saved us again. After all our assurances didn't convince Officer Bolton, she told him, 'There is a Jewish prayer that every Jew knows. Religious people recite it twice daily, and every dying Jew has it on his lips.' Then Mia proceeded to recite: '*Sh'ma Yis-raeil: Adonai Eh-lo-hei-nu, Adonai Eh-chad!*' (Hear, Oh Israel: the Eternal One is our God, the Eternal God alone!)

Skin prickles on my back and tears roll down my face as Papa pauses, lost in his memory. I was taught this prayer in my religious school in Berlin and recite it to myself when I feel very lonely or am especially afraid: It was on my lips when my plane ascended for Italy.

that prayer after he heard it millions of times from dying Jewish lips. I remember that the teacher shook his head and answered, "Ours is not to reason why, but to accept God's will. Man was put on earth by God, and mankind makes mistakes."

Papa raises his head, his cheeks are wet with tears. I look around to see if anyone is watching us.

"He finally believed us, and we actually became friends. Bill helped get us the small apartment we still occupy in the city, and Mia frequently cooked meals for him and his friends," he says, regaining his composure. "You see, Bill was Jewish and knew that prayer as well as we did."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

FILLING IN THE BLANKS

From both sides of the car, I can see rolling green lawns and tall, stately trees as we follow a wide, gravel path that leads to a large, gray, stone house.

"We're going to a family by the name of Ludwig -- Max and Inge Ludwig and their daughter Käte, if I remember the daughter's name correctly. They had her late in life, Herr Ludwig told me. She was a surprise baby arriving just when they had totally given up on ever having children. She's a year or so older than you, and while I conduct business with Herr Ludwig -- we have to drive around for a week or so to visit drafty factories and workshops near Cologne -- you can spend time with Käte. In fact, they've invited you to sleep at their house. I think you'll have fun."

"All right," I say, unwilling to show how disappointed I am that we will not spend every minute together. I comment on the beautiful, well-kept grounds, seeking a neutral subject while I bite my cheek to keep from crying.

Herr Ludwig, a tall, broad-shouldered man with straight posture and twinkly eyes, answers the door. He steps outside to knock the ashes out of his pipe by tapping it on his heel.

"Welcome, welcome," he says, urging us to follow him into a huge living

room with dark wooden floors and a high ceiling with a glistening, crystal chandelier. Frau Ludwig is sipping coffee, and Käte, very sun-tanned in a red-and-white striped dress, look tiny. She is sunken deep into the dark-green sofa, backed by a wide tapestry that depicts a hunting scene. The round table next to the sofa is filled with framed photographs of Käte: wearing a fine red coat trimmed with white fur; dressed in white shorts holding a tennis racket; and sitting on a sled, pulled by a beaming Herr Ludwig. I realize that mother doesn't display any pictures of me. I offer my hand to Frau Ludwig, who, as she rises, spreads her expensive scent. When she turns her head to greet Papa, I notice that her brown hair is held together by two pearl-crusted combs. I am very impressed. She introduces Käte, who is taller than her mother, and already physically mature. "Our daughter has been dying to meet you. She wants to learn all your American secrets," she says affectionately.

Herr Ludwig, carefully filling his pipe from a tobacco pouch, makes jovial comments about his daughter. It is obvious that they both are very proud of her.

"Let's go up to my room," Käte suggests. Her tanned hand reaches for mine, as she makes a short curtsy in her parent's direction and pulls me along. Papa nods encouragement to my questioning glance. I follow her up the curved, staircase. My feet sink into soft carpeted steps, held down by brass bars. She points out her parents bedroom at the far end of the hall and precedes me into her lovely room, carpeted in white, and decorated in white, soft pink and mint green. There are matching twin beds. She flops down on one bed, and flicks her long, thick brown ribbon-tied pony tail to her right shoulder, and pats the blanket beside her.

"Come here, Vivi, and tell me all about American boys," she says. "I've read that they all know how to french kiss." I guess my face registers shock because she laughs out loud. "In fact, I know for certain that they do, because my favorite cousin, Ursula, has a pen pal, Susan, who lives in Chicago, and Susan wrote her that she's already french kissed five or six boys," she informs me, her lips pursed in awe.

"How often have you," she asks in a tone that sounds certain that I, too, am experienced. "Have you kissed back with your tongue?" To not appear as backward as I am, I change the subject. I tell her that, according to my father, I will be staying in her house for a week while he conducts business in and around Cologne, and because I have lots of books to read, I won't interfere with her usual schedule.

"Our house is run by a clock," Käte explains. "My parents have set times for breakfast, lunch and dinner, but you can always get a snack from our cook, Frau Stoller. She looks stern but is really a pussy cat. The housemaid's name is Jutta; she's 19. And I don't have a summer schedule. It will be great fun to have your company."

I am glad that Papa had shown me the proper way to select silverware from a set table and how to unfold my napkin when I sit down to a meal, because, over the following week, I have many challenges. The first one is how to eat tiny, green peas with a fork without spearing them or watching them roll off my fork. When it comes to those long spears of white asparagus, I don't touch them until I study Frau Ludwig. She delicately cuts small slices with a knife and fork, while Herr Ludwig

heartily spears the whole asparagus, and eats it from beginning to end with no cutting. I copy Frau Ludwig and observe that Käte's elbows cling to her sides as she maneuvers peas onto the fork with her knife.

Papa joins us for several dinners, but his time for me, alone, is limited, because he and Herr Ludwig have to discuss business contracts. Papa wants to represent a German factory product in Italy, and, in addition, expand a new line of Italian machinery for export to Germany.

In the meantime, I am learning many secrets about being a female from Käte, who has been menstruating for four years. I am still waiting for my period to begin. What I don't tell her is that in the plane's bathroom there were stacks of packaged Kotex pads, and I took three to examine them and to be prepared, just in case

I admire the way Käte's eyelashes tilt charmingly, and am quite envious, until I spot her in the bathroom gathering her lashes into a curved tool, which she squeezes together. She lends me the tool, and then, I, too, have curled lashes. I am so proud, I bat my eyelids frequently. This causes the housemaid Jutta to ask me if I have developed a nervous eye tick.

Before we go bike riding to the nearby park, Käte lets me select one of her lipsticks. I choose a light pink color, and then Käte applies a skin-colored cream to her face which covers angry red blotches, and then she sprinkles powder on her nose. She wears her hair pinned back, exposing her tiny, flat ears. I wish mine didn't stand out like they do, but I won't glue them again, as I did in the spring, when I bought a tube of Duco Cement and applied glue to the tip of my ears, firmly attaching them to my hair. The glue stuck for a couple of weeks until I had to cut the

hair around my ears to free them from my reddened, irritated skin. It took many more weeks before my ears stopped burning and lost their fiery red color. As we finally leave for our bike ride, Käte appraises me with a quizzical look and suggests that I wear her red V neck sweater. "It's more figure-flattering," she explains.

The excuse she gives her parents and my father for getting us out after dinner, is that we lost some nuts and bolts from our bike wheels and have to retrace our steps to look for them. Herr Ludwig winks at Papa as we escape, leaving them chuckling about today's youth. It is our last evening together, and for me, the visit has been a great learning experience and a lot of fun.

Long gray clouds hide most of the blue sky for our return drive to Italy. Papa asks me about my impression of the Ludwig house and, in particular, about my friendship with Käte.

"I liked getting to know a German teenager. We never talked about the war or Jews or politics -- just about average boy-and-girl concerns. However, she is much more advanced than I am."

"What do you mean? She's just a year older than you."

"She thinks that American girls are more forward than Germans. For one thing, she asked me if I am still a virgin."

"What?" He laughs, but sounds as shocked as I was when she asked me. "She thinks that American boys are very fast. But it was one of her friends that got herself into trouble. She pointed her out to me. A girl named Clara, who gave her virginity

to a boy named Peter. I met both in the park near Käte's house. They seemed to still be in love," I tell him, "but I was upset at the thought of them taking a chance on making a baby. They are much too young to be a family, for a child.

"Has Clara told her parents?"

"Yes, I think so. Unless she lied. She claims that her parents will keep the baby and send Clara away to a school."

"Would you like to pretend to live Käte's life and be like her?" he asks, his smile evaporating.

"It's hard to even relate to her life," I answer. "On the first morning I was making my bed and she snapped at me. 'We don't make our beds; if we did, we would be taking Jutta's job away. That's her job, that's how she earns her salary.' Next, Käte admonished me for straightening up, 'If you hang up all your clothes and put all your things away, you are eliminating her job.' So Käte made sure that her room was always a mess in the mornings. Papa chuckles and says that she lives a privileged life and can't help taking it for granted."

"But I liked the way she carries herself ... with such an air of confidence.... That must come from an inner security of love. Only a history of respect and love would give a person that confidence," I say. "I do envy her that. In fact, I was afraid to tell her what my daily chores are at home. You know, mother needs my help with walking the dog, ironing her uniforms, housework, laundry and cooking. In fact, she doesn't trust washing machines, because she doesn't think that they really clean. So she soaks all the laundry in our tub overnight, and the first one to shower

or bathe, which is usually me, has to first scrub laundry, rinse it, wring it out and hang it on the pull-out stand in the bathroom. I make sure I get up one hour earlier when I notice the full tub."

"That would make me lose my appetite for a shower," he says. "What do you cook for dinner?"

"I heat soup and drop in cut up hot dogs or bake chicken legs sprinkled with spices. I like the dark meat. Sometimes, I grate potatoes and make potato pancakes; but they are a lot of trouble, and I always manage to scrape my fingers on the grater."

He reaches for my finger tips, kisses them lightly and says that he would rather have me for a daughter than any other girl. He places my palm against his chest. A moment later he says, "I know how much you like animals. Look to your left." My eyes follow the direction of his outstretched arm to see a mother goose, followed by a long line of babies who are waddling from a pond to a stretch of grassy meadow.

Many miles have passed, and a brilliant sun now peeks through the dreary clouds.

"I wonder, Papa, how do you feel working with Germans? You seem to get along well with Herr Ludwig and his wife. Is it hard for you to be with them? Do you blame them for what happened to us?"

"Yes, of course I blame them," he says, growing silent again, steering the car into a lane that leads toward Switzerland. His voice drops with dim resignation, "The ones who stood by without helping - the majority. They assisted in our

persecution with energetic zeal. Every word out of Hitler's mouth was cheered and carried out. I do hope that when they get to hell, they have to live in our shoes for eternity," he says, turning to me with raised eyebrows to see if I agree.

"But I've never lost sight of the ones who helped us, although it endangered them.... Life goes on for those of us who were lucky enough to survive. Yes, I am bitter, but I can't let my bitterness rule my life. I have to go on. And I have to trust again. But as far as being a Jew in Germany.... I wouldn't admit this to anyone but you. I am still afraid. Very afraid. More afraid than I was during my years under Hitler. I guess, with time and age, the dangers have become even more real than when I lived with them. I am afraid of being a Jew in Italy, or anywhere in the world. It's odd that I have more terror now.... A psychiatrist would probably explain that I can afford to feel anxiety now that we are safe. Back then, I had to go on without allowing the luxury of fright to rule my thoughts.... To tell you the truth, I haven't thought this deeply about my feelings. You are hearing thoughts that I haven't even admitted to myself " His forehead is wrinkled as he squints through the windshield, intensely staring at the road. I nod, somehow scared by his serious tone of voice. I pat his shoulders for a long while, until I feel his body relax the tight grip on the steering wheel.

After he lights another cigarette, he says, "By the way, I called Mia last night -- as I do every night -- and guess what? Never mind, you can't possibly guess. Remember that we talked about my friend Paul Schmidt and how he saved my life?"

I look out of the window and nod, picturing myself, sitting in an oversized fry pan in Paul's restaurant kitchen.

"Well, he and his wife Ingrid are in Italy. He called Mia from Florence and told her that he's coming to Azzano. Paul will probably get there at about the same time we will. Imagine that," he says thoughtfully. "Isn't it strange how my past is joining the present this summer?"

We sit in silence for awhile, ignoring the landscape that flashes by quickly. Sounds, shapes and colors are a blur. We are lost in our thoughts and memories of years gone by.

We disturb a flock of black birds in a tree, causing them to circle in the sky, before returning to their favorite branch. With a faint smile on his lips, Papa says that the birds remind him of the day Mia needed surgery in Berlin.

"Mia was pregnant. She was sure of it. There was no way that she could have a baby. She needed an abortion, although neither one of us wanted to lose a child. We didn't know anyone who could perform the surgery. Jews were not allowed to go to the hospital. The hospital authorities would have reported her to the police, and she would be off to a concentration camp."

"You mean I would have had another brother or sister?" I ask.

"Yes, but it was out of the question with the S.S. breathing down our necks. Medals for multiple children were given to Aryans, certainly not to Jews."

"My first school teacher had a medal for having four children," I say.

"Well, no medals for Jewish babies," he says matter-of-factly. "So I borrowed a

dark-haired, female identification pass from a friend of Ingrid Schmidt. Next, we had to make Mia resemble the photograph. Luckily the woman in the picture wore a hat, a small black hat at a jaunty angle that covered part of her head. So we went shopping for as similar a hat as we could find. All the while, I addressed Mia as Frau Grete Seidler ... coaching her to respond to the new name. I thought that if Mia gave the same impression as the woman in the photo, the admitting person wouldn't study her face too closely. And that is how it went. When the hospital released her, I picked her up. The nurse told me that she had lost a lot of blood and needed good food and rest to recover. She recommended a rich chicken broth for a couple of days...." His voice drifts off as if he forgot what he was saying. Then, as we race down the crowded road, he lights a fresh cigarette with trembling hands.

"Mia was frail and very weak when I took her to the place where we were staying. I felt helpless and guilty and couldn't do anything really helpful for Mia other than to keep placing a cold compress on her head to keep the fever down. While I changed compresses, I figured out a way to make her a good broth so she could regain her strength.

"As you know, chickens were hard to find -- especially for us, living in the city in hiding and all that went with it," he says soberly. "Those birds just reminded me.

"At daybreak, I went to the park near our place. It was April or May of '43. I sat on a bench and spread bread crumbs around and between my feet and pretended to read a newspaper in case a passerby took notice of me. After a while, some pigeons

joined the sparrows who were pecking at the crumbs. I dropped my hat over a pigeon, twisted his neck, plopped it into my briefcase and waited for the next one. I always carried a briefcase. Most men used a briefcase for their lunch or to carry a newspaper. Anyway, I caught about four or five of them; and after plucking their feathers, I made Mia the broth that the nurse had suggested.

I shake my head in amazement.

"And she did recover after a while."

"It's a good thing that the nurse didn't tell you that Mia needed beef broth, because I don't think that you could have trapped a cow under your hat."

As we cross the border into Italy, Papa suggests we eat in a Trattoria that serves very good spaghetti and sauce. After it is served, he shows me how to wind spaghetti around my firmly-placed fork, turning the fork slowly until I have enough noodles for a mouthful.

"There is a lot that I don't understand, Papa. I know that you once escaped from the *Grosse Hamburger Strasse* in 1943 when I was little. I remember how proud I was because you shared that information with me on one of our visits. Was it after that escape that Mia needed the surgery? My grandparents were already gone."

"The Nazi's started deporting Jews in August 1942. I stopped working at Siemens just in time, after I heard that some of my friends and co-workers were taken away by the Nazis."

"Mother worked at Siemens with you, right?"

"Yes, until we divorced. Because she was married to me, she too had to work at Siemens. All Jews were forced to work for the large Siemens Company in Berlin."

"Did they hit you or mistreat you there at Siemens?"

"No, they didn't, although the wages were very low, of course. We did all kinds of work that had to do with the war effort, such as, assembling machinery, office work, packing boxes, unpacking boxes; at times, up to 8,000 of us were employed. My sister, Hanni, and Gert had returned to Berlin from Paderborn, a town where they had lived for a while. So they worked with us, as well as Mia. In fact, that's where I met and got to know Mia. Your mother and I did not get along. I have to be honest and take much of the responsibility for our failure. I don't know if I would have been a different person were it not for the Hitler regime. Living with the dreadful fear of death did make me act irresponsibly, because I didn't know if I would still be alive the next day.... Who knows?" He swallows hard and continues in a matter-of-fact tone. I watch his face.

"Your mother was terribly jealous and frequently accused me of being unfaithful. Frankly I was. She just didn't know with whom, and generally suspected the wrong person," he says with a side ward glance at me to check for my reaction. He hesitates, as if deciding whether or not I am old enough to hear what he has to say. I don't change my facial expression because mother has told me many times that Papa cheated while they were married. I used to defend him, which caused many arguments, because I wouldn't agree to side with her. I told her that her marriage

was between her and my father and as a daughter, I didn't want to be forced to take sides. Our conversations always ended with mother being mad at me and calling me disloyal.

"Anyway, we were officially divorced, primarily to keep you safe as a *Mishling*. Fortunately, children were rated according to the mother's religion rather than the father's. I know that you still had a Jewish food ration card, had to wear the star and were not allowed to attend school, but ... even so, you were much safer. Having me for a father was a terrible danger to you. At times, I had even considered keeping you with me, but at your Oma's house you were in a much safer environment... for the both of us. You wouldn't have wanted to leave your Oma anyway, would you?"

"No," I answer and wonder if he said that just to be diplomatic.

"Your mother was allowed to stop working at Siemens after she gave up the Jewish religion. Anyway, we were not living together at that point. You probably can't remember us ever living together as a family, can you?"

"No," I answer sadly as he strokes my hair and lets his hand rest on my shoulder. "I can't even remember being in the same room with both my parents," I say.

"Ali has some recollections about your sister Hanni," I say to change the subject. "She was very pretty and liked to laugh and tease him about what his first kiss would be like. She kidded him that he'd probably have to sneeze when a girl's lips touched his or, worse yet, he'd get the hiccups. He also told me that she liked to

sing and dance and have fun.”

“My sweet, lovely Hanni, would be 31 this August on the 22nd.... If she had survived He pauses while his words sink in and I, once more, picture the awful scene my mother witnessed when the family was taken by the Gestapo in 1942.

After a while, Papa continues. “For a while, life was bearable for us. I worked. I used Jewish ration cards, receiving less food than Aryans, but I was allowed to occupy my apartment. Then the law was passed that all Jews must wear the Star-of-David cloth, identifying us as Jews. That was harder to get used to, but ... people even got used to that harassment. However, I never wore one. My policy was to disobey any and all the laws that the Nazis set up for us. I felt that, ‘I can do anything I want, just not get caught.’

“I stayed at Siemens till I heard of the first roundup of Jews. I knew that it was just a matter of time for all of us after that, and I left the job, the apartment I had been occupying, and I never used my food-ration card again.

“So, officially, I no longer existed. Shortly after that day, my parents – your grandparents – Mia’s parents, my sister Hanni, her husband Gert, all were among the earliest deportees.” His voice cracks. “Deportees ... that’s a rather clean word for a heinous deed.” He hunches low over the table. After a deep sigh, he’s silent. I look out of the restaurant window at the flowering rose bushes. Papa’s words evoke the image of sad-looking people, wearing dark, yellow cloth imprinted with black Stars-of-David sewn to their clothing. I once saw an undersized horse pull an oversized wagon, struggling uphill, while the cruel wagon operator whipped and cursed the

helpless animal. And for some reason that mental picture comes to my mind as I think of my grandparents.

"Soon after our loved ones were taken, the S. S. took all Jews – from apartments, work and off the streets. Mia had a very close call around that time with the Gestapo. She will tell you about it, personally, if you ask her. I could tell you about the incident, but she was there and I wasn't," he says. "I was actually glad that my parents didn't have to witness and be a part of this, because it was terrible. Truly dreadful. Most of the people were sent to Poland to concentration camps built and run by Germans with Polish assistance. I still don't know where my parents were sent and will probably never know, though my guess is Auschwitz."

"And you never heard from or about our family again?"

"No," he confirms. "Not since your mother contacted me following their arrest. And I was very grateful that she was there to help them at that time. I know it was very hard for her," he says, stirring his cup of espresso and lighting another cigarette.

"Actually, it was a cigarette that helped me flee from the Gestapo that first time in Berlin," he says, studying the lit tip. "Because it was while a guard was distracted lighting his cigarette, that I made my get-away."

"You climbed over a wall and ran through a cemetery to escape. Right?"

He is silent. He grips the cup while staring into space as if he sees something that I can't see. "Yes," he grunts. "The final stop was to be the Weimar- Buchenwald concentration camp, but I cheated my fate."

He looks at the bill, pulls money out of his wallet and says that it is time to move on. The sign on the door clinks, bidding us farewell and inviting us to come again soon. The sign reminds me of our neighborhood store in Berlin, "Kluster's Fruit and Vegetable," the store that forbade dogs and Jews to enter. I shake my head and realize that, thank goodness, normally months pass without my thinking about the old days. I take a deep breath. Arms in arm, we walk to the car and climb into Papa's Fiat.

"How did you get caught?" I ask, once Papa is on the road again.

"The Nazis made a mass sweep one day in '43. In fact, I know exactly, that it was the 11th of January. I rented an apartment that Mia and I occasionally used. The landlord thought that my wife and I traveled for our business. I kept clothes in a number of places, even with your Oma, just in case it was impossible to return to one place. Paul Schmidt was about my size, so Mia and I kept stuff with him, as well. In any case, thank goodness, Mia was not with me that day.

I was unlocking my apartment door that morning, when a Gestapo came up the stairs and arrested me.

"Hans Ert? You are under arrest."

"Very undramatic," he says with a deep sigh. "Maybe a *Spitzel*, (spotter,) had followed me, gave me away ... Who knows? The Gestapo took me to the *Grosse Hamburger Strasse*, Prison. My overcoat, watch and money were taken, and I was locked into a cell.

"A few days later, prisoners were assembled in the courtyard. I think we were

to be transported out. The grounds backed onto an old Jewish cemetery. Shrubs and toppled headstones were between me and the cemetery wall. I inched my way toward the wall, as close as I could, keeping my eye on the guards, who were helping each other light cigarettes. The cigarettes needed shielding because of a strong breeze. Alert for my moment, I seized it. While the guards huddled together to light their cigarettes, I leaped to the top of the wall, and without turning around, let myself drop to the ground on the other side. Fortunately, I heard no shouts or sirens from the prison side and have no idea how or when the guards noticed my disappearance." Papa stares into space and I feel, that in his mind, he is back on that wall right now. With a deep sigh he continues.

"I walked into the first building I saw. Fear pushed me on. Fear also held me back and kept me from running. Because, I knew that my behavior must seem normal to anyone who observed me. So, from there, I zig-zagged into buildings and streets for many hours. I had no money for a train, not even a coin for a telephone call. All I could do was walk and walk, trying to look inconspicuous in January without a winter coat. I was afraid to use alley's, so I forced myself to walk with assurance on main streets.

"Eventually, I made my way to Paul's place. He contacted Mia, and a difficult time began for Mia and me. Of course, I didn't return to my apartment and neither did Mia. We had a signal. If all was well, the curtain was wide open, while one of us was in the apartment. If we both were out, the curtain was pulled to one side. That day I was to come home first. Mia waited all day for the curtain to be wide open

before coming upstairs. It never was, and she knew that I was in trouble. So she never returned to our place, either.

"If life was difficult before my arrest, it became even more so after my escape. I was sought in all of Berlin by the S.S., and I had to hide night and day. In fact, it sounds like a tale, but unfortunately, I understand, that my escape was one of very few from that prison.

"Good old friend, Paul Schmidt, and his wife, Ingrid, helped me. They had the restaurant I took you to in the *Kleist Strasse*, plus a small pub. I used to drive his trucks to make deliveries and performed any job he needed done. In those days, trucks like his had only three wheels. One in the front and two in the rear.

Since I still had my driver's license, I had some papers to show when the police made street or train controls. You know, they didn't need an excuse to stop you and check your identification papers. My problem was that I couldn't get a false license because I was of military age, and the police were always checking men's papers to induct them into the military. In fact, with time, they got so desperate, they took young boys into the military who were not yet 16 up to old men of 60.

Mia also had false papers, and I occasionally used one, such as a ration card, so I could claim that I had forgotten to take my other papers with me that day. A person such as myself, who was living illegally, had to constantly figure out a game plan. What will I say if I'm stopped on the street? In the car? On a train? ..." He nods, his brown eyes narrowing on me, "I'll bet you are tired of listening to your Papa and are just too polite to say it."

"Not at all, Papa, I need to know how life went for you and why I was not with you. Mother told me that you didn't want us anymore and that you just walked away. I never believed that... But it is very important for me to know everything; and anyway, it is our life you are talking about. Please go on," I urge.

"That sounds like an explanation your mother would give," he says dryly.

"Well, I drove the truck for Paul; and because he had restaurants, there was always enough food for Mia and me. You might not remember, but I also brought food to your mother and Oma. Anyway, then came the serious bomb attacks that changed our life further. One night in November of '43, your apartment in *Bach Strasse*, Paul's small restaurant, and the apartment Mia and I were renting under an assumed name were all destroyed."

"I remember that night," I recall. "We went searching through the rubble for our stuff. We found a couple of cooking pots, which we still use in New York. Even Frau Bock, who wanted our apartment in the *Bach Strasse*, lost everything. She told mother that the Gestapo had come for us and that she wanted our apartment when we were taken. I hope that the boy who called me a *Judenzieke* (Jewish goat) lost his bed that night, just like we did." Papa shakes his head in disbelief, knowing only too well that what I say is true.

"Well, as awful as it was to lose everything, the destruction gave me an advantage. I could apply for new papers, claiming that I had lost everything in the attack, plus I used the new papers as my temporary identification. As you know, living in a country ruled by Nazi police was very hard. No one was allowed to rent

an apartment without registering with the police. And as you can imagine, I was not about to show my face in a police station."

"It was after that bomb attack that I moved in with Oma and Opa," I add.

"That's right, and Mia and I moved into a house owned by a Swiss man. He and his family returned to Switzerland because Berlin had become too dangerous a city. His house was bombed in February of '44; and the family in the next house, who didn't know that we were Jewish, let us stay with them for a couple of weeks, while our house was repaired. We slept in their house or spent the night in air-raid shelters or with friends. We weren't choosy, as long as we didn't spend too many nights in the same place. I even bought a new couch and chairs for us when we moved back into the Swiss house. Our peace lasted for 14 days, until my last arrest.

"I can't believe that Paul will come to Azzano," I say. "How wonderful to be able to thank him in person for all he did."

"So many years have passed. Such overwhelming events have happened that scar and warp you until you think you'll never believe in anything good again. In my bleakest moments, I wondered if evil would rule our world forever... But... time does have a way of healing the body and the soul.... Only fear ... the ever present fear, hasn't left me But I have become human again and can appreciate the beauty of nature and certain members of the human race. So, how does one thank a person who put his own life in jeopardy to save another?" Papa wonders aloud.

I have no answer for him as we rush towards Azzano.

CHAPTER THIRTY

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER

Gaby claps her hands together as our car stops. She apparently has been waiting for us, sitting in front of the house on the stone steps. In answer to Gaby's call Mia comes to the open door and waves with both arms. Papa walks around the car to open my door, and I climb out, hesitant to leave the intimate time we shared. Reluctantly, I let go of Papa's hand. Gaby runs toward us. I listen to her childish babble, without understanding the words, yet enjoying her innocent, happy voice.

Mia brushes back a strand of hair and snuggles in Papa's arms, while I bend down to kiss Gaby's cheek. I hold her tightly, waiting to feel sisterly love. I can't help feeling disappointed to have to share Papa again. I don't want our time alone to be over. We've grown close to each other and I don't want that feeling to slip away.

"Paul and Ingrid are already here," Mia says. "They arrived this morning from Florence and I've prepared lunch, just hoping you'd be here in time to join us."

I look up at the hazy blue sky smeared with smoky gray clouds that announce an afternoon rain. I follow Mia and Papa into the house with my valise. Rosina and

Mia's sister, Hilde, carry Papa's suitcases and the grocery bags full of coffee and a variety of German sausage Papa bought in Cologne. Wonderful aromas of sauteed onions and garlic float from the kitchen, causing my stomach to growl with anticipation.

Framed in the doorway of the terrace stands a stout woman with a pleasant smile, big blue eyes and gray hair pinned tightly in a bun behind her head. Soon her husband, Paul, a tall, gray-haired man with a thin grayish black mustache and soft brown eyes, appears, holding a glass of white wine and barely able to contain his joy. He wipes his eyes with the back of his free hand and places the glass on a table. Then he and Papa rush toward each other and stand, facing each other for a moment, before falling into each other's arms. I wipe away happy tears as I watch them. As soon as the men release each other, Papa reaches for a cigarette.

"You still smoke as much as ever, I see. Whenever I've pictured you, I see you smoking," says Paul, "but thank God, you're eyes have lost their haunted look, my friend."

"You are right," Papa says. Staring at his pack of cigarettes he says, "No,... guess I'd rather lose some years of living then give these up. Anyway, how are you, old friend? And do you remember my Vivi? She is here for a visit, as Mia has probably told you."

"Yes, I remember little Vivi, though she's a grown-up young lady now." His brown eyes peer at me. "Hello, my dear," he says, clicking his heels lightly and kissing my hand in a mock enactment of times gone by.

As Papa and Ingrid embrace, Paul says, "We finally retired last fall and want to travel before old age and arthritis take over."

At lunch, Papa asks everyone to lift their glass of wine for a toast to Ingrid and Paul. "To two people who never forgot their humanity, even when everyone around them did," he says, with a quivering voice. He bows his head and points his glass in Paul's direction. "Here's to the loved ones we've lost and to those we've found and will never lose."

Rosina pushes the laden tea wagon across the terrace, breaking the spell of silence that has enveloped everyone. Hilde helps her pass plates of minestrone soup. The conversation revolves around the sights of Italy that Paul has enjoyed. By the time breaded pork chops with lentil puree are served, I have heard the description of many menus and restaurants in which Paul and Ingrid ate on their trip.

After everyone has finished small cups of espresso, Papa pushes his chair away from the table and tucks his hands behind his head. I can tell that the conversation will turn to the war years in Berlin.

"I see that you don't have a dog now, but Hans, let me assure you that your dog Zito had a good life," says Paul.

"I was almost afraid to ask you," says Papa, turning to face Paul. "I don't really want to hear bad news about him and neither does Vivi." Papa reaches over and squeezes my hand. I am glad that he understands how important Zito was to me, too.

"Well this news is only good. Very good. Zito lived to a ripe old age, enjoying a nightly tummy rub from Ingrid. He slept in our bedroom until he just didn't wake up one morning. But when you left, my friend, that dog was a very sad animal," Paul says, waving his hand for emphasis. "He waited at the kitchen door for you many a night. It was quite heartbreaking to see him watch that door till we swept the restaurant and went home." Papa shakes his head with sadness. Paul continues.

"Luckily, I found an old shirt of yours that you must have left in a closet. I knew it was yours, because it still smelled of cigarettes. Anyway, I gave him your shirt, and he settled down with his head on your shirt and seemed content again. I think that he somehow knew that this time you were not coming back."

Paul turns to Hilde, who is seated next to him, and says, "You left Germany in the early '30^s and I don't know how much you remember of the old days; but that particular breed of dog - the German Shepherd -- became a symbol of superiority to Hitler. He had many shepherds. And my friend Hans, defiant as always, had to own a German Shepherd, when those Nazi beasts didn't allow Jews to even own a mutt."

"Remember, Paul," Ingrid smiles, "Zito would appear alone at the kitchen door, scratching until we opened it?"

"Yes, yes," Paul chimes in. "Hans had trained Zito to walk on the opposite side of the street from him, because he didn't want to be seen walking with a German Shepherd, just in case"

"What a crazy life we had to live. Sitting here on a terrace in beautiful Italy together ... it seems unreal.... Fortunately or unfortunately, nothing lasts forever,"

Mia says, rising to refill Paul's wine glass.

"How true," I think, knowing that my time in Italy is more than half over. Addressing Mia, I say, "Papa told me that you had some very close calls with the Gestapo. Do you mind talking about it?" Her cheeks flush, highlighting high cheekbones. She appears to be a little embarrassed by every-one's attention and exchanges a smile with Papa.

"I see that your father has been bringing you up to date," she says replacing her glass on the table and smoothing the tablecloth. She nods at Papa and closes her eyes as she begins speaking. "Your father saved my life. Many times. When the Gestapo arrested my parents, I felt as if they had reached into my chest and ripped my heart out It was just terrible I didn't want to continue living. Hans helped me survive, and I've clung to him ever since. He was my life raft as I bobbed in raging water.

"My first close call was towards the beginning of January, in 1943, when I still worked at the Siemens factory. Forced labor. Hans had already left, but I was afraid to leave. Certainly, not because I wanted the few pennies an hour that Jews were allowed to earn, but I was afraid to call attention to myself.

"Hans had been stockpiling food for us in different locations, keeping a supply in his place and in a locked chest of drawers in a room I shared with four other tenants. My parents' former bedroom and living room held five more tenants. Jews had to share their flats with many others, because of the housing shortage and to keep us together for future arrests.

"I had items that were impossible to get except on the black market, like coffee, sugar, tins of sardines, biscuits, tea, cigarettes, ladies silk stockings, chocolate, liquor and whatever Hans could get his hands on. I don't even know how he got these these goods, but he always said that they might come in handy in the future.

"Hans shared only the most necessary information with me because he wanted to protect me and the others. He said if one is caught and tortured -- it is better not to know anything, than to endanger others. So he didn't tell me who he saw or where the food came from.

"Hans and I had decided to live together in a place he was renting. Of course we would not be together every night. We slept wherever we could, even occasionally in a bomb shelter -- although the shelters could become a trap for us. If a warden had wanted to inspect our papers we would have been in trouble. Some nights were spent in Paul's restaurant; other nights were spent in the sewer. I never slept alone in the sewer, as Hans did.

"So, although I stayed with Hans most of the time, my official registered residence was in my parent's, small, two-bedroom apartment, where I was still hoping that **they** might return. Our dear mother and father were taken by the Gestapo in 1942, for an alleged "resettlement," she says, sharing a sad glance with Hilde.

"In 1937, my parents had sent my sisters to Palestine, Hilde was 13, and Lydia was 15. Soon after, the Nazi government sent my brother Helmut to a German farmer to work on his farm as a forced laborer.

"The man who owned the farm was a very cruel man. He didn't bother Helmut too much, but picked instead on a slight boy whom he called "Little Israel," who also had to work for him. Helmut was only 13, but he was very tall and muscular for his age, looking much older," right Hilde?"

"Yes, my twin was always a big boy. He bragged that because he was born before me, he was the wiser and stronger one. Helmut had a quick temper, and I used to tease him and call him a bully, although he was a very kind person," Hilde says thoughtfully. "I haven't seen my twin since 1937, almost 16 years ago."

"Well, one day, the farmer rode his bike into the field where Helmut and the boy were working," Mia continues. "The boys had a fully loaded hay wagon that was to be unloaded, and the hay was strewn around the field to cover seedlings in the soil. The farmer climbed on top of the wagon to join Helmut who was starting to unload the hay. And just out of cruelty, the farmer ordered the small, slight boy to unload the whole hay wagon by himself. Our brother got so angry that he totally lost his temper and knocked the farmer down from the wagon, jumped down after him and in a panic stole the farmer's bicycle and rode away... all the way to Belgium! I have no idea what all the circumstances were, but he wrote me a brief letter. His note said that eventually he found work in a Belgian coal mine where he lost a finger in an accident, and that after the war, he made his way back to Germany.

"He joined a camp for dislocated Jews in Lampertheim, where he fell in love with a Polish girl named Mila. Because of her, he learned to speak Polish well enough to translate Polish into German at the camp, which made him useful and

earned him more cigarettes than the allotted ration. I really don't know much more, except that I thought it was worth mentioning how our brother managed to escape and survive," Mia says.

"Hans taught me well, always reminding me to use 'my moment.' He trained me to improvise and to evaluate a situation. 'Always plot your escape,' he preached, and he was right. When Hans and I parted each day we went over our plans, practically minute by minute, so I would always know what his plans were and what our eventual goal was -- whether it was meeting for dinner, to spend the night together or just to figure out the next plan. We lived as if we were a military operation, using plan A; and if that wasn't possible, there was plan B etc. If all our housing arrangements failed, we were to meet in a sewer Hans had found for us; but that was a last resort, because of my fear of rats and mice.

"My parent's flat was filled with strangers -- young men and women around my age, who worked at Siemens with me. Our parents had been taken and not heard from..." And in January of '43, I went to work one morning and was told by the foreman that 'I and all the others who lived in my flat were excused from work that day, but, we had to report for work the following day.' He accompanied us home in a company wagon.

"Five minutes after we got into our apartment, two men appeared, wearing full-length, black leather coats and gray fedora hats -- Gestapo.... I'll never forget the moment ...," she says, her chin quivering. "They counted the coats that were

hanging in the hall closet and announced that because there were 10 coats with the proper yellow Star of David, they expected to take 10 people with them. 'You are all under arrest,' they said. 'Pack a few belongings and gather in the living room.'

"I told the Gestapo that I was making a pot of coffee and wanted to know if they'd like some. They both accepted my offer. Once that was prepared, I told them that I was going back to my room. One Gestapo, -- a tall, blond man, -- started to follow me, but one of the other occupants asked him a question about the size of her suitcase and, instead, he followed that person.

I changed into a practical tweed suit with a pleated skirt and brought a package of biscuits into the living room. Then, I went into the kitchen for a serving plate and cups. I said that I had some strawberry jam that they might like and then I replaced my white blouse with a warm pullover. When I returned with the jam, the coffee was ready. I asked if they drank their coffee black or with sugar and the blond one indicated that he preferred sugar. That gave me another reason to get back to my room where I slipped into a sturdy pair of flat loafers. Next, I offered precious Libby canned milk for their steaming coffee cup. I can assure you that my stomach was in a tight knot because I knew that my end was near. But, all the while, I was plotting my get-away.

"Because my fur coat had jewels sewn into the lining, I kept it in my room and never hung it in the hallway closet. Jews weren't even allowed to own fur coats at that time. As I was busy creating a traffic pattern for myself with my traipsing back and forth, I made my plan. Once they were sipping their coffee, I once more went

into my room with a promise of a can of raisins.

"I slipped into my coat and, oh so silently, climbed out of the single window in my room, with my handbag stuffed into the front of my skirt. I climbed onto the roof-top and balanced myself until I spotted a small door. It led to a staircase. I climbed down the stairs and calmly walked out of the house.

Forcing myself not to run because I couldn't afford to call attention to myself, I got to the corner of our street just as a streetcar was leaving. I jumped on, without caring where it was going. I got off at a busy intersection some 20 minutes later, near Alexander Platz and spotted a hat shop.

"I told the owner that I wanted to buy the gray hat in the window, a head-hugging model with a broad brim, which I wore immediately. The hat made me feel less exposed, because it covered part of my face. I told the shopkeeper that my ears were sensitive to the wind and the hat would protect them. It was dark by now, and I was very late for my meeting with Hans. Furthermore, I was in the opposite direction and was too afraid to meet him at his flat. So, I took many streetcars to finally get to Paul's restaurant.

"When Hans eventually met me, he told me that in February he was going to rent an empty house from a man who was leaving the city and that until then, we would manage together, and that he would do his best to protect me.

"And he did and has. Ever since that day," she says, with a far-off look into space. "Each day was a new battle of survival for him, while I stayed in the boarded-up house and hid from the world. I missed my classical music -- my piano -- but,

fear -- fear was my constant companion.

"We moved into other places; they got bombed. Still others got too dangerous with nosy neighbors.... Around the 1st of November of '44, we lost our flat again, and Hans was running out of hiding places. While he was out prowling one day, he found a new sewer tunnel that he felt was safe for hiding.

"Finally, he decided that I should leave the city and visit your former cook, Grete," Mia says, glancing at Paul for confirmation. "I believe she left Berlin in August of '43. That was when the government urged women, children and pensioners to leave the city for small towns and villages because of safety concerns."

Paul nods, "Yes, I remember that, because one night, both of my waitresses and Grete quit. In fact, I read in the newspaper that over 700,000 Berliners left the city."

"Hans had occasionally sent Grete a postcard," Mia continues. "He wanted to keep her place in mind as a possible hiding spot. She was always a friend to us while she worked for you. Anyway, I left the next morning via the *U Bahn* for her place, in the suburbs of Berlin.

"Understandably, she was reluctant to let me stay, and only after I assured her that I wouldn't join her at the bomb shelter, wouldn't use a candle while she was out, and promised to totally stay out of sight and not to leave her house, did she agree.

"Unfortunately, a few days later, a policeman came to the door and asked Grete if an unregistered Jewish woman was living at her place. Unwittingly, I am

sure, she might have let a word slip to a friendly neighbor or someone saw me when I first came. In those days, righteous housewives were filled with rage and hostility if they suspected a Jew in their midst.

"With a trembling voice, I heard Grete admit that an unregistered woman was with her, but she assured the policeman that she had no idea that I was Jewish. Reluctantly, I had to appear and was promptly arrested. The young man took me to the police station where I was locked in a cell. I was relieved that he didn't take my winter coat. The cell was very cold but, even more important, the seams held my jewelry.

"The next morning, the same young policeman was assigned to accompany me to Berlin and bring me to the Gestapo headquarter. I knew that this train ride was my last chance.

"While we rode in silence, I formulated my plan. As we got closer to the city, the train stops got more populated with passengers, and I started to gag and hold my hand over my mouth as if I was about to throw up. I told the policeman that I needed some air and asked if he would stand with me at the train door. He agreed, and with my coat open and my suitcase on my seat, I stood close to the door waiting to gulp air as the doors opened at the next stop. After passengers boarded and the train doors were closing, I hugged my coat around me and jumped out of the train at the very last second.

"I can still see his round, shocked face as the train pulled away," she says without a smile, placing her hand over her heart.

"I made my way to the sewer and didn't leave it until we moved into the Italian Embassy basement. Hans brought me a small valise filled with a suit, blouse and sweater, underwear and stockings, and we waited in the sewer until we could leave Berlin. Forever. I will never return to Germany."

Mia takes a deep breath and sighs. I, too, feel relief. Sunshine filters onto our table, and a bee lands on a bit of spilled sugar.

Papa turns to Paul and embraces him for a long time before he speaks. "You were one of the good people in our evil world. For the most part we were alone. Alone with our pain. Alone with our suffering. I know you don't want to hear this," Papa says, as Paul raises his hand to stop Papa's words. "But evil ruled our lives. Our loved ones went through hell...."

"Mia and I are and always will be, grateful to you and Ingrid for being and acting like decent human beings with compassion and courage, for confirming that German gentiles were actually willing to risk their lives to save another human being. You are a true hero."

I shiver in the sunlight as tears run down my cheeks.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

WILL I EVER SEE YOU AGAIN?

Dear Vivi,

I am glad that you are having a good time with your father and his family. However, you should remind him that you live in New York City -- a big city, without beaches or swimming facilities to which we have access. You need sensible school clothes more than a bathing suit. Incidentally, I did give a lot of your old clothes to the Red Cross drive. They smelled musty, and you will have outgrown them by the time you get home. Plus, I expect that your father was only too happy to buy you a lot of new clothes to wear. Things are okay at home, although I am taking Jule Boras to a small claims court next week. I lent him a sum of money last year for which he gave me an IOU, but he hasn't repaid me one cent. It's probably because he has a new girlfriend to impress. So, I've decided to sue him. I am sure that you will agree with me when I say that he is a no-good-nik.

In the future, I will stick to dogs for love and companionship, as I certainly don't do very well with men. Speaking about dogs, I met a lady at the Senator Cafeteria, whose miniature poodle had a litter six weeks ago. So if all goes well, we'll have a new, black puppy this fall. I will name her Kiki.

Anyway, I miss you and hope you miss me. I will try to meet you when your plane lands at Idlewild, if I can get the time off from the new manager at Howard Johnson's. He seems to like me, and I hope he will let me meet you.

Love from your mother

Rereading her letter I conclude that mother is pleased to have me return. I hope that she didn't give away my brown corduroy skirt: It was my school project last year, and I've looked forward to wearing it again. Mia asked her seamstress to make me a blue corduroy skirt with matching vest, but that one outfit is not the new wardrobe mother apparently expects. In Italy, it is cheaper to have clothes tailored than to buy ready-made clothes. Knowing my mother as well as I do, one outfit will be interpreted as stinginess. She'll say that Papa was too cheap to spend money on me. I have seen how Papa lives; and although it is luxurious compared to how we live in New York, he is not a wealthy man. I noticed that Mia stretches her food money very carefully.

Papa and Mia showed me the forged identification papers that Morcetti had provided for them. I can only imagine the fright they felt. Listening to Papa and Mia explain how they survived amid the insanity of the Nazi world, brought events to my mind that I had mentally, packed far away. What I had accepted as everyday life, affected them more than me, because I never knew a different life. But they did. And they could evaluate the senselessness that I could not.

I know that I didn't say thank you enough for the clothes and trinkets Papa and Mia bought me. I think that it was on purpose on my part, because I needed to feel that I was entitled as a member of the family to not say thank you for everything they gave me. I wanted to feel as if I belonged; constantly expressing gratitude made me feel like an outsider.

My time with Papa, Mia and Gaby has passed very quickly, and I am once more, sitting in an airplane. The summer has flown by much faster than my plane is flying.

One of the highlights of the trip occurred when we visited a seashore community in Rimini, Ricono, for a week's vacation. I wore the blue bathing suit, Papa and Mia bought for me.

I used the trick Käte Ludwig showed me when I complained to her that from the waist up I still look like a boy. She consoled me and tied a wide band tightly under my bust to add and define what nature hasn't yet given me. I must have looked all right because the handsome dark-haired boy who rented out the paddle boats always made space for me on his bench. We couldn't speak to each other, but conversation was not necessary. In fact, Franco seemed to prefer my silent company to that of the Italian girls who found numerous reasons to come over to him. I spent long lazy days turning golden brown in the brilliant sun and jumped endless frosty white waves with Papa and Gaby.

One day, as I got up from the bench and was brushing sand off the seat of my

suit, Franco slipped me a note. On it, he drew a clock, pointing to seven o'clock in the evening. The note showed a tall boy with curly black hair and a girl in a blue bathing suit -- like the one I always wore -- walking on a street, holding hands. He looked at me and pointed to us, and his eyes asked if I would meet him that evening. I shrugged my shoulders and indicated that I had to ask my father. Papa smiled when I showed him the note and said that I could go for a walk with Franco after he talked to him and told him where and at what time I was to return.

I wore white shorts and a sleeveless white turtleneck, cotton-knit sweater that Mia lent me. I felt very glamorous and grown up as I met him by a large fountain in front of our hotel. His face was beaming.

We walked to the main street of the town, past people sitting in sidewalk cafes. We stopped in front of a gift-shop window, hung with green fishing nets, and filled with spiky conch shells. Racks of pierced earrings shaped like miniature sand dollars and sea horses were strung in the net. We took turns pointing out a ring or a bracelet that had special appeal.

It was a perfect evening. We held hands, and I still feel a little tingle in my stomach when I think about it. Just before Franco deposited me in front of our hotel, he tugged at my hand and turned me around to face him.

Then he kissed me. Softly. I remember thinking "I am being kissed... by an Italian boy... and I'm not even 16 years-old."

On Friday afternoon, our last day together, quietly grinning, Franco handed me a small box. I opened it and was thrilled by the dangling, seahorse earrings I had

admired on our special night.

As the airplane cuts through clouds, I touch my right earring and fondle the tiny seashell, to reassure myself that it wasn't all a dream. My carry-on bag sits between my feet and perfect doll eyes look at me over a painted smile. I wonder what mother will say when I get off the plane carrying a doll under my arm. Papa bought me the doll in Bologna, on the drive home from Rimini, when we stopped for lunch. On the boulevard next to our restaurant was a toy store. Papa noticed my interest in a very pretty doll that stood on a pedestal in the window. He asked me if she could replace Gaby's Luciana for me. I told him that Luciana was not replaceable, but that the doll was very beautiful and that I would like to have her and will name her Gina.

Now I stare at her and wonder why I wanted her, because I can't love her like I should. She fills me with melancholy and reminds of something painful. I wish that I had left her in the toy store. I will put her on my dresser in the kitchen at mother's flat.

On the drive to the airport, Papa asked me, "Do you feel anger at life for all the things you missed?"

"I can't miss what I've never had," I told him. "All the events of my childhood were out of my control." I explained that at times I felt like a visitor in a movie house, watching all the events happening as though on a screen.

I spot a silver-colored airplane, flying low, getting ready to land. I think of my last moments with Papa. "Will I ever see you again, Papa?" I asked.

Pulling my hand slowly toward his mouth, he answered, "Of course you will. Most certainly, you'll come again and again. I'll call you, occasionally, and will write you long letters. I promise that it won't take another 10 years."

Walking me to the airplane ramp, he said "Puppilein," ever so softly. My heart ached and the lump in my throat grew. He looked so sad. His face was as gray as his sweater. I hugged him tightly and relished his familiar smell. I felt tears in the corners of my eyes, which I quickly wiped away and held back the rest. I smiled for him and climbed the staircase leading into the plane. From the top platform, I blew him a kiss.

In some ways, my waiting is over now that I've seen Papa.

In some ways, a part of me will always be wanting because we live apart.

In some ways, I'll always be between two worlds.

POSTSCRIPT

Mia died of cancer in 1978.

My father married Lina in Milan, 1979. I regularly visited my father. He died of lung cancer in March of 1985.

My sister Gaby and our families talk on the telephone and visit each other.

My mother never married nor loved again. She died in 1996 in Berlin, Germany.

Ali and Sonja celebrate 48 years of marriage and we talk and visit frequently.

I married twice and have two children, from my first marriage. A daughter Stephanie and a son David. I enjoy a very close and loving relationship with both.

My husband Gerald and I share many interests and I feel blessed.

